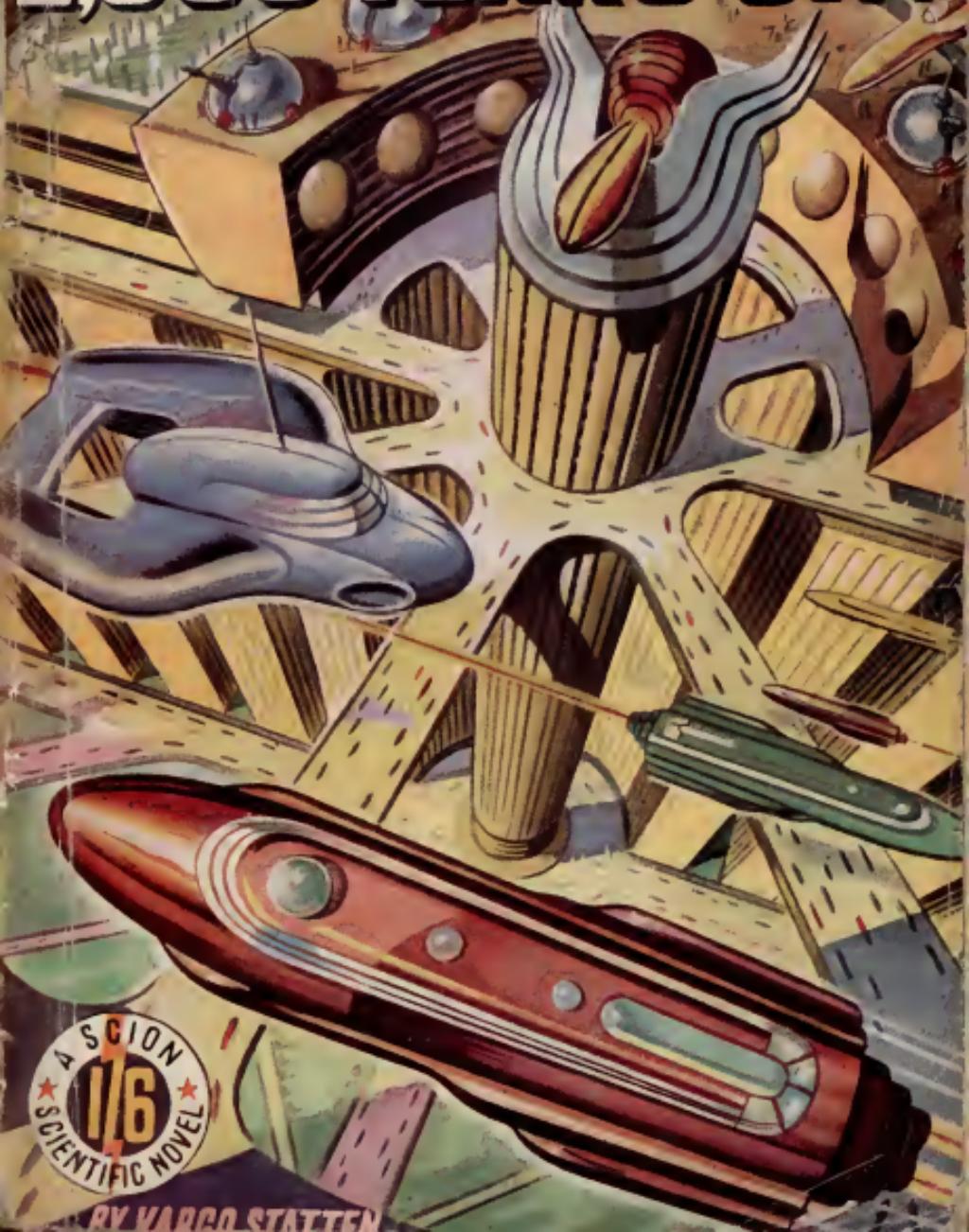


2,000 YEARS ON!



A SCIENCE
FICTION
NOVEL

BY VARGO STATTEN

2,000

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ON

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STATTEN

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CHAPTER ONE

Jeremy Clyde had never forgotten Professor Einwold's lecture. He had written down every word of it in short-hand because it seemed to him that at the time the famous physicist had been inspired. He had delivered facts concerning Time which, for Jeremy at least—unless he had the type of mind unusually well equipped for receiving them—had seemed to offer a workable basis for practical demonstration.

"Time does not really exist," Professor Einwold had said. "It is purely the term which science applies to a condition of a space which it does not really comprehend. We know there has been a past ; we know there is a future. We can prove the one but not the other. Hence the term 'Time,' so that an insurmountable difficulty may become resolved into common understanding."

When that statement had been made Jeremy Clyde had been a young physics student, with rare claims to brilliance. In five more years, at the age of twenty, he had become an analyst in a Government department—a purely bread-and-butter job whilst he worked, and worked, and *still* worked, on the dim beginnings of the theory Professor Einwold had outlined.

Four more years passed. By this time Jeremy Clyde had read everything ever written by Einstein, Eddington,

Jeans, and all the other imposing array of scientists. He had worked out a scheme for himself, and made practical tests in the little laboratory attached to his home—a sacrosanct territory where his parents did not dare to tread.

"Time," Jeremy Clyde declared one evening, entirely to himself, "definitely does not exist! It is a conception engendered by the limitations of a physical body. And a physical body, according to Eddington and Jeans, is the outward manifestation of thought itself. Change the thought and you change the body in like proportion. You believe you know the past: so, adjust your mind to the situation and there is no reason why you shouldn't know the future!"

Another two years of experiment led him to add an amendment, and in his notes it read—

Time is a circle, in which thought itself and all its creations go in an everlasting cycle, repeating the process without end. Therefore, if you have in a remote past done the same things you are doing now, it is logical to assume that some hangover of memory may be left behind—a hangover from the past which, from the present standpoint, will be the *future*, so far back is it in the time circle.

The medium for thought is the brain. Therefore, any hangover must be in the brain. Find that, and you have the key to future time. All you will really do is awaken a memory from the remote past.

It was at this point that Jeremy Clyde really knew he had got something, and the "something" took the shape of complicated masses of apparatus contrived from hard-earned savings and erected in spare time. Again and again he built and rebuilt, tested and experimented, finally commandeering assistance from two other young men with ideas similar to his own, though they had not his technical brilliance.

When he had things as he wanted them he summoned his two friends one Saturday evening and indicated his apparatus.

"Boys, I have it!" he declared. "You know my theory regarding the memory hangover. This"—he motioned to a piece of apparatus—"is the Probe."

His two friends were silent, looking first at him and then the equipment. Jeremy Clyde studied their reactions intently. He was a black-haired, blue-eyed young man, with the sharp features of both thinker and doer.

"You don't mean you're going to use this stuff on your brain to probe for the right spot, do you?" one of his friends—Len Seaton—demanded.

"Just that."

"And what then?"

"Tell you better when I know something," Jeremy grinned. "For the moment I want you and Harry to follow instructions."

Jeremy seated himself in the chair immediately under the wilderness of odd-looking lenses, lamps and tubes. Following instructions, Len Seaton busied himself with the switchboard. One projector gave forth a violet ray which enveloped Jeremy's head completely.

Opposite him, so he could see it clearly, a squared and numbered screen came into life and gave a perfect silhouette, X-ray fashion, of his skull. It differed only from X-ray in that the convolutions of the brain were clearly shown with more vividity than any other part.

"There!" Jeremy cried. "Look in Section Nine, Square Five! There's a black oval mark—a blind spot. That is a hangover!"

He pressed a switch on the chair arm.

"Taking a photograph," he explained. Then giving the order to cut off the entire apparatus he got to his feet. Within a few minutes the self-developing tank had produced a finished print. He handed it round in obvious delight.

"So what?" Harry Carlton growled. "Now you have a blind spot what good does it do you? You still can't see the future!"

"But I shall!" Jeremy Clyde's voice was tense. "You

notice that that blind spot is exactly where we might expect it to be? In the subconscious area. To get a clear knowledge of what the spot contains there is only one method to use."

"A surgeon should link up the blank portion of your brain with the active portion," Len Seaton said. "And would that be a ticklish job!"

"I don't need a surgeon," Jeremy answered. "And why a real nerve? A nerve is only a fleshy means of carrying minute electrical sensations. A small electric device can do it just as well. In short—an external mechanical nerve!"

He turned aside and brought forth an object not unlike a stethoscope. At both ends were suction caps and small dry batteries. Between the caps was a length of strong cable.

"A brain gives off minute electric charges: everybody knows that," Jeremy resumed. "This mechanical device can accomplish the thing through the skullbone. Thereby the blind spot and normal brain area would be linked. At least that's the way I see it."

"Sounds like committing suicide to me," Harry Carlton commented.

Jeremy shrugged. "Anyway I'm going to try it!"

Again he switched on his brain-reading equipment, studied the screen and the photograph for a moment, and then he clamped one end of the artificial nerve device on to his skull. The other suction cup he moved indecisively around his head, positioning it by watching it on the screen. Time and again he fished round the blind spot, then finally pressed the cap home.

A sensation of deadly sickness crawled through him, as if his body were slowly being turned inside out. His laboratory, the tensed faces of his friends, misted mysteriously and were gone. Images as though reflected from disturbed water rippled through his brain.

Then suddenly a chaotic mass of impressions slammed into his consciousness. There were scurrying people

superimposed on ragged cliffs, against which plunged foaming seas. From the cliffs there seemed to sprout towers from an unknown, remote, incomparably beautiful city, catching the light of an unseen sun.

Machines—people—mist. Deadly pain, dying away.

Jeremy opened his eyes to find he was sprawled on the laboratory floor, brandy scorching the back of his throat.

"Jerry, you're a damned fool!" Len Seaton told him bluntly. "You went out like a light. Good job we switched off the apparatus otherwise——"

"I saw the future," Jerry whispered.

"Eh?" His two friends looked at him, then at each other.

"I saw it!" he insisted. "Just for a moment—I'd have seen more only you must have cut off the equipment——"

With their help he got to his feet and went on talking urgently. "Don't you understand what it means? I've succeeded!"

"It's crazy, Jerry," Harry Carlton said uneasily.

"Crazy it may be, but it happened! If I had concentrated at that moment my mind would have controlled my body. Suppose, for instance, I had concentrated on a time two thousand years ahead of now? My body would have gone there because it would have to obey my mind. Time, you see, just doesn't exist when you're in that state. The mind can go anywhere, and the body follows automatically."

Jerry swung round, looking at the apparatus. Then he seemed to make up his mind.

"I'm trying again," he said earnestly. "Whilst I've got the hang of the thing. And this time, don't switch off!"

He flung in the controls on the panel and then settled himself once more under the lenses, lamps, and tubes. Len Seaton came over and regarded him anxiously.

"Look, Jerry, just what are you planning to do?"

"I'm going to see if the body does obey the mind.

"I'm concentrating all my brain power on the year 3950, which is two thousand years ahead of now. If this idea works, I'll fade from this time and reappear in the future one."

"But how the hell do you come back?" Harry Carlton snapped. "Be sensible, man!"

Jerry relaxed for a moment and grinned. "If I succeed I'll have proved my point," he said. "I shall *not* come back because I will have caused my physical body to move into a totally different space and time. 3950 can't be any worse than this present age so I'll take the risk. Adjust the time-set to 3950 please!"

Plainly his mind was made up and there was nothing the two friends could do. Jerry, utterly absorbed by his experiment, no longer considered them in his scheme of things. He again fixed the suction caps in position—and the moment his brain began to reel he threw every ounce of his concentration into visualising the figures 3950 which, in his present state of mind, were not just meaningless symbols but the era of a future time.

He felt as though hell itself had broken loose within his skull. A thrilling, racking current seemed to surge through him—so pitiless and agonising that it took him all his time to hold on to his one burning concentration—3950.

The laboratory had gone, and everything in it. He was flying through abysmal space with stars gyrating crazily. He was hot. He was cold. He fought in emptiness and then amidst forces which had no explanation or meaning. Cities, oceans, wildernesses, people, animals—they flashed over his mental vision like things seen transiently in a blaze of lightning.

Darkness. He was falling. The height seemed endless. He was Jeremy Clyde. No, he was a god! Now he was amoeba. Now he was nothing. Smothering in darkness and silence, lost to all he had ever known and held dear—

The Universe was still.



Jerry stirred slowly, then became still again with a feeling of delightful comfort. As he lay, the remembrance of things accomplished came back to him. The laboratory! The experiment! The attempt to cross time by making his body obey the stronger force of his mind—

He opened his eyes and stared fixedly at either a white roof or a white sky immeasurably far overhead. Puzzled, he looked to either side of him. Everywhere there seemed to be a remoteness. The walls were a tremendous distance away. In one direction there were no walls at all—only colossal windows which gave a view of buildings climbing in gleaming ridges to the sky. They seemed braced together by massive bridges along which there were moving specks. Perhaps people, perhaps—

Jerry swallowed hard and then sat up. He felt limp. In amazement he looked at himself. He had been wearing a laboratory smock and a tweed suit: now he was in a thin garment of purple, rather like a glorified nightshirt, with a close fitting pair of trunks beneath it.

Expensiveness and vastness were all around him, and he was as apart from his laboratory as he could possibly be.

By degrees he gathered that he was lying on a superbly comfortable bed in the mightiest bedroom he had ever seen—then he noticed that a young man was coming towards him from the distance. He moved at a half run across the shining metallic floor—a young man dressed rather like an ancient Roman, with a toga and short trunks. He also seemed to be magnificently muscled.

"What goes on around here?" Jerry called to him.

Instead of answering the young man gazed at him fixedly from a distance, hesitated, and then raced from the room. An interval followed during which Jerry tried to imagine what had happened. He thought he knew, but it was a thought so astounding he did not dare to dwell on it too closely.

At the sound of the distant door reopening he looked up to behold the young man returning, accompanied by another individual in robes of rich purple. When he had reached Jerry's side he gave a little bow.

"What on earth's happened?" Jerry demanded.

"I am glad you have recovered, Excellence," the man in purple said, in unusually precise English.

"Well, obviously I've recovered—" Jerry broke off and frowned. "What did you call me?"

"Excellence." The man in purple gave his slight bow. He was very tall and thin, rendered more so by his long purple robe. He had the face of an aesthetic—thin, cold, with very high cheekbones. The forehead was lofty, with dead black hair receding from the temples. His light blue eyes were respectful, yet somehow inhuman. He looked the kind of man accustomed to giving orders and exacting implicit obedience.

"I don't quite understand how I got here," Jerry said, getting to his feet and contemplating his long robe. "I understand even less why I'm dressed like this. And, come to think of it, I'm hungry!"

"Of course! Forgive me, Excellence, for not being more mindful of your comfort."

The man in purple signalled briefly and the young "Roman" picked Jerry up in his powerful arms as though he were a baby. Jerry inwardly resented being treated like a swooning heroine but there didn't seem to be anything else for it but to submit. He found himself carried from the great room into one adjoining. Here he was set down in an ornate chair before a table. At the table two robots stood at attention. The man in purple issued some orders and in response to them the robots spent the next few minutes loading the table with the requirements for a meal. To Jerry's disgust it consisted of some oval pellets and a queer tasting drink. None the less he felt strength surging back into him when he had finished consuming them.

Throughout this time the man in purple had stood a little distance away, his hands in the pockets of his

robe, a look of complete inscrutability on his hatchet-face. Behind him, ready for orders, was the young "Roman" with the steel muscles.

Jerry gave a surreptitious glance around him. He was in a room where the furniture was liberal, but in every case made of metal. Giant mirrors hung on the walls, globes clustered in the lofty, immaculate ceiling. At the huge windows hung material resembling cloth-of-gold, drawn back by metallic clips. Outside, buildings climbed on top of buildings in their struggle to reach the sky.

"I—I don't dare say what I'm thinking," Jerry remarked presently, glancing up.

The man in purple gazed back at him unemotionally.

"I—er—made a Time experiment," Jerry continued, his meal over and his attention entirely devoted to the man in purple. "I have the most disturbing feeling that I succeeded."

"Why 'disturbing,' Excellence, when you set yourself out to accomplish your purpose?"

"It's a shock," Jerry muttered, looking about him. Then he asked a question. "Who are you, anyway?"

"My name, Excellence, is Nafrin." Again the slight bow. "My position in the social order is that of World Secretary."

"Oh. And why do you call me Excellence?"

"Because you are he for whom we have waited. We knew you must come because history has recorded it that you made a time experiment in 1950 and were never seen again after that."

This time Jerry did not say anything. His eyes strayed half nervously to the immensity around him. The room in which he now sat was quite a thousand feet above the ground. As the World Secretary motioned him he got to his feet and, feeling dwarfed by the size of the window, he moved to it and looked down on the canyons created by incredible buildings which upthrust

from the ground like the creations of a giant. Buildings with endless windows. Buildings linked together by pedestrian levels and ramps made for traffic. The traffic was queerly designed: the aircraft circling overhead seemed to be nothing more than a pair of wings—

With an effort Jerry got a grip on himself and turned to Nafrin as he stood in impersonal silence nearby.

"The fact that I made an experiment with time is no reason for calling me 'Excellence,' surely?" Jerry asked.

"That title has been conferred upon you, Excellence, because you are the ruler of the world—and not only of this world but others, too."

Jerry opened his mouth and then shut it again. He took refuge in an incredulous smile. Nafrin eyed him for a moment, then motioned to the nearby divan. They both seated themselves.

"The explanation is not very difficult to grasp, Excellence," Nafrin continued. "As you have believed, you are now two thousand years ahead of the time from which you came. This is the year 3950—and the year 360 by the New Calendar. Your experiment succeeded. You endeavoured, according to history, to cross time by subjecting the body to the command of the mind—and you succeeded. I would remark, however, that there is no reverse process. You can never go back."

"No—I realise that." Jerry's voice was quiet from sheer amazement. He was convinced he would soon wake up.

"We knew approximately to the very hour when you ought to appear," Nafrin explained, "for the simple reason that since history says you started off in 1950 to find the year 3950, you must logically appear in this year sometime."

"Unless the experiment had gone wrong."

"We were sure it had not. History has recorded your notes, your method—everything. No other scientist has been able to piece together your brilliant plan, but

we could see that it was workable, and therefore you would surely appear. So, we charted geographically the spot on the earth where you should present yourself—that spot having been the identical space where your laboratory once stood—and scouts were always on hand—watching, watching, watching. Then you arrived, but unconscious from your amazing transition. You were brought here immediately, given restoratives, and after that there was nothing for us to do but await your revival."

Jerry was silent, musing. He had overlooked the possibility of posterity being able to read of his experiment as though it were history.

"And I rule the world?" he asked, puzzled.

"Everything that has been done has been done in your name," Nafrin answered, shrugging his thin shoulders. "You are, to the people, an indeterminate ruler whom they have never seen, yet they have all to bow down to your will. All orders, all proclamations, all manifestos, have been made in your name. You are a kind of diety—and I have been appointed as the controller and dispensator of your commands."

"And is every country under the domination of London?" Jerry enquired.

"London no longer exists, Excellence. Let me show you the map of the world today."

Nafrin rose and walked with dignified tread from the room, the young "Roman" dashing ahead of him to get the door open. Jerry followed and was ushered into a chamber adjoining his own—again a place of gigantic size, wherein the furniture comprised a massive desk, a switchboard embedded in it and containing endless buttons and small bulbs, and one or two softly-sprung chairs. In the floor, engraven in something resembling pure gold, was a gigantic square with one extraordinary word in the centre of it. Jerry paused and studied it, puzzled. It said:

EARVENMERMAR

"This is your controlling office, Excellence," Nafrin explained, turning. "From here you rule the destiny of a planet, a task which I have been performing up to your arrival, the people's demand that you show yourself to them having been fully ignored. In the walls are inset television colour screens which, by simply pressing the requisite button on your desk, will give you a sound picture of whatever is happening anywhere at any moment. I will be delighted to show you the intracacies—and here is a map of the world today."

Jerry glanced up from studying the floor. He pointed to the queer name.

"What does this mean, Nafrin? It sounds like double-talk."

The World Secretary gave his thin smile. "That, Excellence, is the insignia of the planet. The square represents the four sides of the Union of the Four Planets. The name includes the four in abbreviated form—Earth, Venus, Mercury and Mars. Hence the term—Ear-Ven-Mer-Mar. You will find the insignia on your robes, your stationery, everywhere you go. The Union of Four."

"So they finally discovered space travel?"

"It has been an accomplished fact for eighteen hundred years, Excellence. However, here is the map."

Jerry felt somehow that Nafrin did not wish to talk on interplanetary subjects; or else he was more interested in indicating the enormous relief-map which, at the touch of a button, had come into illuminated being on the wall. Profoundly interested, and recovered a little from the daze of his plunge into a time two thousand years ahead, Jerry contemplated it.

In a way it was still recognisable, but there were differences. The British Isles, for one thing, had become linked by a narrow land corridor to the continent

of former Europe. South America was further north than hitherto and the West Indies had vanished. The former names had gone and in place of them were queer designations which, in his present state of bewilderment, Jerry was in no mood to learn.

"What happened to put that strip of land across the English Channel?" he asked.

"A subterranean upheaval, Excellence, some thousand years ago."

"Mmmm—very interesting. Well, I take it the next thing I do is stand on a balcony, or something, and show myself to the people?"

The map vanished at a touch on a wall button. Nafrin turned without haste.

"That will not be necessary, Excellence," he replied. "You will be televised to all public centres so that the people of this planet—and other planets too—may have verification of the fact that you really exist. So many are inclined to doubt. In these days it is unnecessary to show yourself personally. Televised images and projections of the original, by atomic dissembly, do away with the need for it."

"How do you mean, so many are inclined to doubt?" Jerry asked slowly, thinking, and for a moment he fancied he saw the suspicion of a glint in those pale eyes.

"People who do not reason for themselves are liable to question a ruler whom they have never seen, Excellence. Now that they can do so their murmurings can be silenced."

"I see." Jerry decided to wrestle with this evasion later on. He looked at the muscular "Roman." "Who is this chap? Somebody I should know?"

"Zem by name, Excellence. Your personal body-guard."

Jerry nodded, then said: "Since I don't need to show myself to the people personally I can at least take a look at this planet. From a plane, perhaps?"

"You can do that without leaving the building, Excellence. A certain section of the workers would resent seeing you at close quarters. There will always be discontent amongst certain sections, I'm afraid."

"There are one or two things we need to get straight," Jerry said, after a pause. "In the first place, concerning these other planets—Venus, Mars, and Mercury. To me they are just names for other worlds, about which I have only the knowledge of my own time. You say I rule them?"

"Through me, Excellence. Earth is the master-planet."

"And I am as much a ghost to the inhabitants of those planets as I am here?"

"You are a power unseen—but respected and feared. The three planets concerned were conquered by force of arms four hundred years ago. This world conquered them."

"I find that hard to believe. My own planet as an aggressor? I must have more facts."

"They are quite simple, Excellence." In the year 1970 the atomic war which the world had feared broke out. It lasted six months with no side winning and civilisation in ruins. The survivors picked themselves up and then formed a world government devoted to scientific pursuits without thought of further war. But there were still spirits who wanted expansion and power—so Mars was attacked and conquered. Venus and Mercury, both inhabited, came next, and fell under the sway of Earth. Now those planets' inhabitants do exactly as we tell them. They are engaged on the task of building machinery and equipment for the conquest of the outer planets. It is the dream of this planet to be the ruler of the entire solar system."

"A planet can't dream up anything!" Jerry retorted, feeling sure by now he did not like Nafrin one little bit.

"You mean it is *your* dream, and you think I'll fall in with it?"

"Let us say it is the dream of the Interplanetary Council," Nafrin countered, quite undisturbed.

Jerry was not to be put off. "You're not making sense, Nafrin! I am the ruler of this planet: you said so yourself. What right has any Council to make plans without my sanction? It is like a Government of my own time making decisions without consulting the King."

"You have hardly been in a position to be consulted, Excellence."

"Well I am now! Summon this Council immediately. I want to know just what they are driving at. If I don't like what they are doing I'll put a stop to it."

Nafrin's cadaverous face did not show anger. Instead he held his hands gently across his middle, cracking his knuckles deliberately as he reflected. Jerry watched him impatiently.

"The Interplanetary Council does not exist on Earth, Excellence," Nafrin explained finally. "It has its headquarters in space, so it can be an impartial body. It is composed of members from each planet—Earth, Venus, Mercury, and Mars. To summon them here is impossible: you will have to go to them."

"All right then, I'll go. How soon?"

"It may take some months. It will have to be arranged."

Jerry tightened his lips. He had the instinctive feeling that Nafrin was lying, but just at the moment it would not pay to say so. Later, when he had discovered exactly how he stood in the extraordinary business he might be able to work with more certainty.

"Perhaps," he said, "I am trying to run before I can walk. I will take the matter up again later. In the meantime I still want to see the planet I am controlling. And I want to do it personally."

"I cannot permit it." Nafrin's mouth tightened. "It would place you in too much danger. The intelligentsia and financial masters of the city never move from their own particular territory. That would give the workers the chance they want."

"You mean there might be a revolution?" Jerry asked. "It doesn't sound as though the Government has been very wise whilst I've been missing. Good rulers don't fear revolutions."

"The quality of the rulership has nothing to do with it, Excellence. There will always be those who resent anything higher than themselves. Let me explain something——"

Again a button clicked and this time the wall depicted a cross sectional plan of the mighty city in which Jerry had awakened. He could see now that it was divided into sections, each section numbered.

"Necessity has compelled buildings to grow upwards instead of outwards," Nafrin explained. "The tallest buildings are a thousand feet high. Up to the five hundred level the workers are housed. In the remaining five hundred feet are the residences of the intelligentsia and money controllers. In the upper regions there is more light and air, more freedom for instruments receiving radio and television waves from other planets——"

"Better all round, in fact?" Jerry asked. "Same old story. Those who do the hard work can stifle and rot : those who have money can do as they like?"

"Those who have money," Nafrin replied, "have earned it by their ability, and are entitled to their reward. No power is conferred in this day and age : it has to be gained in the hardest possible way. However, the inhabitants below the five-hundred foot level have nothing but bitter hatred for those above. And hatred of you is greatest of all. That is the drawback."

"I'm sure I could improve things if I talked to them personally," Jerry said.

"Possibly, but you cannot take the risk, Excellence. You are the most important man in the world!"

Jerry turned away from the map, thinking matters out as best he could. At last he turned back to Nafrin as he stood waiting in unmoved silence.

"For the moment I'll be content with a television tour of the planet," Jerry told him. "Also show me how to work the buttons on this desk. In other words an explanation of my daily routine."

"With pleasure, Excellence. If you will be seated at this desk I'll gladly outline everything. You will find that in this Age one does not need to stir hand or foot. Science accomplishes everything. Only two types work—the actual workers themselves, and the robots. Now, this button controls the television equipment—"

CHAPTER TWO

At the close of the day Jerry had come to realise just how utterly different was everything to the time from which he had come. Earth was apparently unified, to a great extent, but the old spirit of aggression was still abroad, fostered by tremendous scientific knowledge and almost a complete monopoly of the minerals and ores necessary to the continuation of a scientific empire.

Jerry learned how to control his desk switches, how to set robots obeying his orders merely by mental control. He saw the world in a darkened projection room, the uncannily perfect instrument revealing every part of the globe in pin sharp colour. Everywhere the giant cities stood. There were no waste areas. Climate was controlled. Hundreds of square miles of what had been desert were given over now to food products. Every power of Nature was harnessed to the use of Man.

Even more powerful telescopic equipment using television principles and X-rays, to penetrate cloud banks, gave views also of Mars, Venus, and Mercury. Mars had been taken over as a colony and had fairly plentiful underground cities. The people inhabiting the red planet appeared to be big-headed, red-skinned,

ever seven feet tall. On Venus, the one time jungles had been tamed and massive cities stood in their place. The Venusians were like Earthlings, only white skinned due to lack of direct sunlight—the clouds of their planet forming a constant diffusion—and none of them stood taller than five feet.

Mercury, the most inhospitable world of all, whirling only 36-million miles from the sun, did not appear to have any cities. In fact it was a hell planet—one side blistered eternally by such savage heat that even metal boiled like milk, and the other side split into ravines by eternal frost. Yet even here beings, accustomed to such conditions by Nature, were at work. Big, ten-foot creatures, very thin and covered in a black scaly armour, Nature's provision against conditions which would have killed an unprotected Earthman instantly.

Altogether, Jerry had plenty to think about when the day was over. He had spent it in Wonderland, gazing on planets which, in his time, had been mere blurs even in the most powerful of telescopes.

At sunset Nafrin left him to his own devices—except for the silent Zem always on guard—and Jerry ate his lonely meal of concentrates whilst he thought things out. This necessity taken care of, he wandered to the window, gazing into the flood of artificial light which made the titanic city bright as day. Yet there were no shadows anywhere. Even in his own quarters, in this highest building of all, the light which glowed did not seem to have any source. It gave the effect of somehow being embodied in the air.

"Atomic light, Excellence," Zem explained when questioned about it. "In actual fact it is not light but radiation—a type of radiation which, reacting on the eye, gives the impression of light. It is disseminated from the power-house in the city's centre."

Jerry nodded moodily, his hands plunged in the pockets of his robe. He was feeling incredibly lonely. His mind insisted on going back to his laboratory, to

the two friends he had left so abruptly, to the hundred and one things he had known and loved. All gone. Wiped out completely by a span of time which made his mind reel. Two thousand years! Everything transformed into dust—even the girl with whom he had made an occasional date. Jerry sighed to himself.

Then his thoughts moved to things present. He just could not stay here a virtual prisoner, bringing the world to his doorstep, travelling millions of miles across space without moving from his chair. He was not that kind of a man. And besides, the concentrates and restoratives of this year of 3950 had made him feel more vigorous than ever. Pensively he looked across at Zem.

"Zem, come here a moment," he requested, and the heavily muscled young man obeyed immediately.

"Your wishes, Excellence?" he asked.

"I'm going to take a chance with you," Jerry said, with a frank look. "You're about my own age, and you look like a chap with plenty of sense to match that Herculean physique of yours. So, how about answering a few questions for me?"

Zem hesitated. "It would depend on their nature, Excellence. I am, of course, under the orders of the World Secretary."

"Forget that cold-blooded fish for a moment and remember that I am higher than he is in the social order. If it came to a showdown whom would you obey? Him—or me?"

"In that event, Excellence—you. As ruler you could enforce it."

"Very well then. Tell me, whereabouts is this Interplanetary Council Nafrin speaks of? How do I get to it? He was delightfully vague about telling me."

"I—I cannot tell you that, Excellence." Zem gave an anxious look about him. "I'm afraid to. There is no guarantee but what Nafrin may be listening to our conversation."

"I see. So he's an eavesdropper as well, is he? Not that I put it past him—and if he hears me all the better. He's up to something and I want to know what it is. Isn't there somewhere where we can talk without being overheard?"

For answer Zem moved to the desk and wrote a few words on a slip of paper. Jerry read them—"In the Working Quarters we would be able to converse in peace."

"Let's go, then," Jerry said; then he glanced up as the huge metal doors opened and Nafrin himself came in. He gave his obeisance, then his cold blue eyes strayed to Zem.

"It is possible, Excellence," Nafrin said calmly, "that Zem has forgotten he is sworn to secrecy concerning all things connected with the Government of this planet. That silence was enforced upon him because he was present at many meetings of the Interplanetary Council."

"Zem has not done anything except obey my orders," Jerry retorted. "That he is compelled to do since I am ruler."

"There are certain orders he is not empowered to obey, Excellence," Nafrin snapped. "Zem, you may leave us."

Jerry hesitated, not sure what to do. Zem, however, had no doubts. He left the great room hastily and closed the doors. Nafrin considered them, his thin knuckles cracking as he pulled at them gently.

"Do you have to do that?" Jerry blazed at him, and he gave a little start.

"I am so sorry, Excellence—an annoying habit of mine. However, to return to business. I shall change your bodyguard from here on and let a robot keep watch over you."

"Why don't you admit I'm a prisoner and have done with it?" Jerry demanded. "That's true, isn't it? You've kicked out Zem in case he talks too much."

"Please understand my side, Excellence," Nafrin pleaded. "For many years I have controlled the destinies of four planets, in your name. I cannot allow anybody who is not in authority to start giving their own answers to matters which puzzle you. It would place me in a wrong light, and I will not allow it. Whatever you wish to know I will tell you—if I can."

"Very well then. Where does the Interplanetary Council meet? I gather you heard that question through listening into this room. That in itself is damned unethical."

"I listen where I deem fit, Excellence. It is necessary to preserve my high position—and yours. Answering your question, the Council meets in space. I have already told you that."

"Where in space? They don't sit on a meteor to talk things over, do they?"

Nafrin hesitated, obviously thinking fast. But Jerry was thinking a good deal faster—and said so.

"Frankly, Nafrin, there's something around here which smells," he said. "I can't escape the idea that you, and some invisible friends of yours whom I haven't contacted, are playing for mighty high stakes and using me as your catspaw. Only I don't intend to stand for it, see? If I'm ruler of the world, as I am, I'm going to run things the way *I* like them!"

With that he strode from the room and slammed the doors. He glanced up and down the corridor where guards stood at attention, queer weapons in their belts. Swiftly he headed to the nearest one and he drew himself up sharply.

"Where did my bodyguard go?" Jerry demanded.

"Out at the main entrance, Excellence, to the Sixtieth Pedestrian Level."

"And where's the main entrance? You'd better show me: I'm new around here."

"Certainly, Excellence." The man began to move smartly and Jerry kept pace with him. They marched through many gleaming corridors, along which were closed metal doors—all different controlling departments, until at length a tremendous archway became visible ahead. Beyond it, in the shadowless glare of the lights, people were passing to and fro.

Reaching the steps Jerry looked about him on the passers-by. There were men and women, all garbed very lightly, assured of the fact that the scientifically controlled climate would never vary. Here and there men and women caught sight of Jerry gazing at them, but they did nothing more than glance at him and then continue on their way.

"Where does Zem live?" Jerry asked the guard. "I need him urgently."

"In the Controlling Section, Fourth Junction," the guard replied. "I will show you if you wish. We can get there fairly quickly by aerotaxi—" The man paused and apologised. "Your forgiveness, Excellence. I was thinking of my own way of travelling. You, of course, can have your choice of the fleet of air and space machines at the disposal of the Governing body."

"That was the only reason I wanted Zem," Jerry replied. "I've decided to view the city personally—particularly the quarters where the workers reside. Take me to the air fleet immediately."

The guard obeyed the order promptly enough, leading the way for a short distance along the busy pedestrian level, then branching off down a deserted metallic alley way. Evidently this region was taboo to anybody except the ruling faction. The alley way ended in an escalator which carried Jerry and the guard up to an enormous flat space whereon there stood about a dozen gleaming machines, of varying types. Some were just two wings with a control cabin; others were shaped like cigars; still others were just enormous balls studded with portholes.

"Does your Excellence know how to control one of these air machines?" the guard enquired, pulling open the cabin door of one of the winged flyers.

"No, but I'm willing to learn. You'd better be the pilot on this occasion."

"Yes, Excellence." The man hesitated a little. "With all due deference, Excellence, you are sure you wish to make this trip to the lower levels?"

"Never more sure of anything in my life—and don't start handing me a lot of warnings, my friend. I'm perfectly aware of what I am doing."

Since he had no authority to argue the matter the guard said no more. He held the door whilst Jerry climbed into a small but comfortable control room, settling himself before a complicated switchboard. Then the guard followed behind him, clamped the door, and squatted down in the pilot's seat. He touched a button and without a sound the machine lifted vertically—without the use of helicopter screws—and then at fifty feet above the roof airport it began to move forward. In a moment or two it was hovering over the mighty canyons created by the brilliantly lighted edifices.

Jerry sat gazing below him in wonder, marvelling at the engineering genius which had produced such a city. In every possible way it typified power and science. He marvelled too at the manner in which the aircraft floated, gradually descending after the fashion of a lift.

The change in the buildings as the 500ft. level was passed became obvious. Though still the same buildings, of course, they nevertheless had a less influential air. The windows were more numerous, but smaller, reminding Jerry of prisons. The lighting was less powerful here, too, and more on the lines of normal electricity—

So finally the machine completed its thousand-foot

drop and settled gently on a wide, flat stretch of land at the side of one of the buildings. Jerry clambered outside and looked about him, then up at the incredible heights where the monsters of metal and stone scraped the heavens.

"I intend to explore for awhile," Jerry said, as the guard waited for orders. "How shall I find you again?"

"You do not wish me to accompany you, Excellence?"

"Not at the moment. I learn things best myself—but I have to know how to locate you again."

The guard turned and clambered back into the plane's cabin. When he reappeared he had in his hand an object resembling a wrist-watch.

"If you will take this, Excellence, and strap it on your arm, you will be able to find your way back here," he explained. "It is a compass, the needle magnetised to point to the atom motor in this vessel. The magnets holding the motor are the source of the influence."

"Fair enough," Jerry said, relapsing into his 1950 idiom. "I don't know how long I'll be, but here I go."

Turning he walked away across the stretch of land, his hand resting lightly on the weapon in his belt. Though he felt pretty certain that Nafrin had been playing some game of his own in warning him to keep away from the workers, he was nevertheless prepared for anything which might develop.

What impressed him most when he had left the open ground and reached the vista of a metallic street was the completely deserted air which hung about everywhere, and the gauntness of it all. Just the gigantic buildings with their lighted windows, the yawning streets—by no means well lighted—and the constant throb of power. At this point of "rock bottom" there

was no vehicular traffic. It all moved along the bridges and tracks high above, making hardly any sound.

To Jerry's annoyance, though he passed innumerable buildings which must have contained workers, he had no way of seeing inside them. All the doors were tightly closed and his efforts to open them were useless. Evidently once at work the workers stayed that way.

He had reached an intersection where four dreary looking streets met in an X-pattern, and was trying to decide what he ought to do to gather information, when the whole vast "lower world" suddenly came to life. Somewhere a siren started to scream, ear-splitting in its intensity, and upon that signal hundreds of doors clanged open as they might in a prison in 1950, every door controlled by a single electrical circuit.

Fans of light blazed into the gloom. There was the shift and scrape of innumerable feet, the droning of mighty engines clearly audible now the factories were momentarily opened.

Jerry looked about him urgently, by no means anxious to be caught amidst an army of workers leaving their shift. He hurried from his conspicuous position at the centre of the X and concealed himself in an inset of one of the buildings, relying on the intense shadow to hide him. In this respect he was fairly successful—or else it was that the workers were too apathetic to care whether he was there or not.

Horrified, he stood watching as from each bright doorway along the vistas there began to approach a single file of workers, their hands on each others' shoulders after the fashion of a slave gang. Men and women alike all wore light blue uniforms with a single large "W" stamped on the back. They shuffled rather than walked, their feet encased in what seemed clogs. In the first file which went past him Jerry counted thirty four women and fifty men. Every one

of them looked haggard, pale, and utterly exhausted. On the faces of some of them perspiration gleamed, presumably from the torrid heat of the factory in which they had been working.

Gradually the files from all four vistas converged; then the four columns went slouching away in the distance. Some of the smaller figures Jerry assumed were children, likewise attired in the prevailing pale blue. And hardly had the four columns reached a distant corner before four more appeared, coming in the opposite direction, presumably the new shift.

Intently Jerry watched them as they came nearer. They had faces every bit as emaciated as those he had already seen, but their actions were not quite so weary. They had the same prison-like way of moving, hands on shoulders, but there was more tautness in the way they held themselves.

Things had reached a pitch where Jerry had got to know the details for himself, and as far as he could see there was only one way to do it—become a worker himself and trust to luck that he would not be recognised. So he crouched well back in the shadows as the files came past him and waited until they had gone by. When the files broke up into four, each going in a different direction, he sped after the nearest one and seized the last worker under the chin, dragging him backwards silently. The remainder of the column went on, all in step, never glancing either to right or left.

"Take it easy," Jerry whispered to the startled man he was holding. "I'm not going to hurt you. I only want your overalls, or uniform, or whatever it is."

"But—but who are you?" the man gasped. "From your attire you belong to the Upper Level! You cannot mean you wish to go in the shift? It doesn't make sense—"

"You don't know me, then?"

"Should I?" the man asked, puzzled.

"Forget it," Jerry said quickly. "I've to catch up with that column before it goes in the factory. Hurry up."

To have the chance of escaping his work shift made the man remove his uniform at top speed. Jerry slipped it on, zipped it up, and then raced after the column which was now turning into the first great doorway of one of the distant buildings. He was just in time to take his place at the end of the file. Thereafter, his face averted, he shuffled down a long aisle-way with the rest of the workers, aware of the fact that here and there guards were standing, some of them with vicious-looking whips in their belts.

Once inside the factory, or whatever it was—Jerry had not yet been able to determine—the file began to break up into independent units. Each man and woman moved to a task to which they were obviously accustomed, leaving Jerry wondering what to do next. Then he saw a shovel standing in the midst of some nearby ores so went across to it and started sweeping up the ores into a truck on a narrow-gauge railway close at hand.

Apparently he had guessed his job correctly for no guard came across to ask him what he was up to. He went on working and looked around him. This particular place he discovered, was not a factory but a foundry. Some distance away men with gleaming bodies and clad only in shorts, wearing blue glasses, were feeding the mighty blast furnaces. In other directions men and women in the prevailing blue were moving metal ingots, controlling overhead cranes, shifting white hot metal bars with enormous pliers, and feeding the great furnace crucibles with metal ores which stood in small mountains in all directions. The heat and the clangour were overpowering. It was work enough to break the strongest man. Certainly it was no place for the

various women Jerry saw around him. They moved listlessly, but evidently had to continue or suffer punishment.

Jerry, for his part, was in such perfect physical condition the task of shovelling ores did not trouble him in the least—and it was the kind of work which gave him a chance to think as well. Just what the devil had happened to reduce the average man and woman to this form of inhuman slavery? He remembered Nafrin saying that the inhabitants of other worlds were engaged on the task of building machinery and equipment for the conquest of the outer planets—apparently the same work was going on here. In the lower regions Earth seemed to have become a gigantic workshop, evidently following out the instructions of a mysterious gang of aggressors who called themselves "The Interplanetary Council."

"Sooner I have words with that collection of no-goods, the better," Jerry muttered to himself. "I'll tell them what I—"

He broke off and turned sharply at hearing a groan. He was just in time to see the woman who had been working near him collapse helplessly on the floor, her shovel falling out of her grip. Immediately Jerry had reached her side, raising her head and shoulders in his arm. She was probably in the late twenties, with a tired but definitely pretty face. Her blonde hair, despite the tremendous heat of the building, still retained a mass of waves. She stirred a little as Jerry held her.

"Finding it too much for you?" he asked, smiling. "Here, let me help you—"

"Put that woman down, you!"

Jerry glanced up in surprise. One of the guards had come on the scene—bully-necked, square shouldered, his whip clenched in a hairy paw.

"Why?" Jerry asked him coldly, and inwardly

wondered why nobody had recognised him so far.
"This woman is too exhausted to go on working. She needs a hospital and—"

"Shut up!" the guard interrupted. "And get away from her!"

Instead, Jerry ignored the order and raised the girl gently to her feet, then he bit his lip in anguish as the tails of the whip cut murderously across his back. The girl herself had recovered her senses by now and drew away from him in alarm, her big grey eyes wide in consternation.

"You—you shouldn't have helped—" she said, in horror. "Nobody does—here!"

The whip came down again across Jerry's shoulders, and that settled it. Swinging round he caught the guard by the wrist, swung him round violently, and then delivered a pole-axing blow which battered under his square jaw. He jolted, but did not overbalance. Again he swung his whip, this time towards the grey-eyed girl who was cowering nearby.

"You would, would you?" Jerry cried, and leapt forward in time to jolt the overseer's arm. The man swore thickly, then he went flying backwards from a smashing blow in the mouth. Dazed, blood trickling from his split lower lip, he landed on his back.

"You shouldn't! You *shouldn't!*" gasped the girl, catching Jerry's arm. "You'll be killed for this! Tortured, too! Nobody can treat a guard like that—"

"I can—and did," Jerry snapped, putting his arm about her. "Seems to me it's time a few hard-baked gentlemen around here learned better manners!"

He breathed hard, watching the overseer narrowly as he got to his feet, his hand to his injured lip. The from other quarters, too, their faces grim and weapons in their hands. The workers had ceased their various look on his face said plain murder, Guards were coming

tasks to watch. It was plain from their expressions that an affair like this was completely novel.

Jerry stood his ground, his fists clenched. The overseer he had knocked down came close, his pig-eyes glinting.

"You know what this means, 57 ?" he demanded, glancing briefly at the number on Jerry's shoulder. "Death, my friend. And a slow one ! The ultimate penalty for striking a guard is—"

"What is the meaning of this disturbance ?"

The cold, measured voice breaking in on the guard's made everybody turn in astonishment. Jerry looked up quickly, even though he knew the unemotional tone. Nafrin was advancing in his purple robes, his majestic attitude quite sufficient to over-awe those who stood around him.

"I never thought the time would come when I'd be glad to see you, Nafrin," Jerry said.

"I followed you with a television eye. Excellence," the World Secretary responded. "I decided I had better rescue you from this region of workers and unwanteds."

"Who—who are you ?" the girl asked in amazement, as Jerry held on to her—then she found Nafrin's impersonal eyes upon her.

"At the moment, woman, your shoulders are being held by the ruler of the world," he answered. "Be good enough to withdraw yourself from his grip !"

"No you don't," Jerry said, as she tried to pull away. Then as Nafrin raised an eyebrow, Jerry added : "This girl needs a rest. Nafrin, and I mean to see that she gets it. And a lot of other people too."

The workers looked at him fixedly, and he read cold hate in their eyes now his identity was known. Only the girl whom he had befriended had a look of hope on her tired features.

"Nafrin," Jerry continued, "I understood you to say that you had informed everybody of my arrival out of Time?"

"That is so, Excellence—but you departed rather hastily from your headquarters before I had the chance to televise your image to the masses at large. Had that been done you would have been recognised—and probably torn to pieces by such scum as this!"

The insult brought an angry murmur from the assembled workers and guards, but none of them made a hostile move. It was quite obvious to Jerry that Nafrin, though without any guards to support him, had the mastery of the situation.

"What I have seen I do not like," Jerry pronounced. "And there are going to be some changes . . ." He looked about him on the workers. "I don't exactly know yet what kind of a story you have been told concerning me," he said, "but if I can do anything to lighten your load, I will . . . Now, Natrin, we will leave. This young woman and myself."

"Why do you have to demean yourself by befriending a female worker?" Nafrin asked, quite irritably for him. "You seem to forget your supreme position, Excellence."

"On the contrary, I'm remembering it. If the ruler can't help his people, nobody can . . ."

With that, Jerry took the half-frightened girl's arm and kept her beside him as he left the factory. In the street he waited beside the aircraft in which Nafrin had evidently descended from the heights. And presently the World Secretary appeared, his thin lips tight, the glint of anger still in his pale blue eyes.

"I have a machine elsewhere in this region," Jerry told him, unstrapping the compass from his wrist. "Take this and find where the machine is, then drive it back to the upper regions. I can handle this flyer well enough to take this young lady and myself back to my headquarters."

Nafrin took the compass and eyed it with cold resentment.

"Do I understand I am being given the task of a menial servant, Excellence? Wherever your vessel is I can easily inform the guard in charge of it, through pocket radio, that you no longer require it."

"You have to get back yourself," Jerry explained, "and this vessel only holds two people."

With that he helped the girl into the cabin and climbed in after her. Without so much as another glance at the icily furious World Secretary, Jerry handled the switches as he had seen the guard do it, and the machine began its feather-light rise between the gigantic buildings.

Beside him the girl sat in awed silence, her wide grey eyes watching the gleaming facades of the buildings as the flyer rose past them; then gradually the five-hundred foot level was passed and the lighting became more brilliant, the building outlines more lavish. Here and there, where drapes had not been drawn across windows, there were glimpses of enormous, magnificently furnished rooms and contented-looking men and women within them.

"I—I don't think you ought to do this, Excellence," the girl said uneasily. "At least, not because of me."

"I know exactly what I'm doing, Miss—er—" Jerry paused and gave her a friendly grin. "What's the name?"

"Alvia Menron, but I'm usually called 126."

"To me you're Alvia: I prefer it."

Jerry did not add any more there and then: he had to give his attention to bringing the plane down on the great roof-top park. The moment the machine had ceased moving he opened the cabin door and helped the girl out. She hesitated a little as though nervous as to what to do next.

"Nothing to worry about," Jerry smiled. "I'm boss up here."

He took her arm once again and led the way to the escalator. Remembering his journey down the various alley-ways and streets he finally succeeded in returning without mishap to the great building where his headquarters lay. He ushered the girl into his controlling office and closed the door. She stood looking around her with that same wondering expression, her pretty face still half frightened.

"Sit down, Miss—er—I mean Alvia," Jerry invited, motioning to a chair; then he pressed a button on his desk. "Find Zem and send him to me," he ordered.

"I have to report, Excellence, that Zem is no longer available," came the voice of the Communications Controller.

"When I issue an instruction I want it obeyed," Jerry retorted.

"True, Excellence—but in this case Zem cannot obey. He met with an accident on the Fifty-Third Pedestrian Way. Apparently he fell from a higher pedestrian way and was instantly killed. Nafrin gave orders for his body to be disintegrated, in conformity with the law."

"I—see," Jerry said slowly, staring before him; then he added: "Then send me another servant. One I can trust—if there *is* one."

He switched off and tightened his lips for a moment; then he glanced towards the girl. She was prettier than he had thought, now she was in bright light. And there was a helplessness about her which flattered his masculine pride.

"I am going to place a suite at your disposal, Alvia," he said, moving over to her. "I will also see to it that a woman becomes your servant. You will

be allowed to rest as much as you wish, and be quite undisturbed."

"You must have a reason for helping me, Excellence," she said quietly. "Otherwise, how can I reconcile such kindness with the ruler of the world?"

Jerry frowned at her. "Such kindness? Tell me, Alvia, what sort of a person am I supposed to be? I gather the general opinion is that I'm pretty unpleasant!"

"You are the most hated, most powerful being in the Union of Four," she said. "From generation to generation your name has been handed down. You have been called the 'Traveller', a being moving through Time from a past age and enforcing his wishes on the people of the future — that is, the present of today. Everything — every decree, every conquest, has been at your behest, the ruling faction having a means of contacting you in your journey through Time."

"And the masses have believed such bunkum?"

"A personality unseen issuing orders *has* to be believed. People have been told of your terrifying power, of the world you intend to create — you have been built up into a legend, a person who will come to rule with a rod of iron, your orders being given in advance by some complex Time process. Nafrin is the power behind you . . . or so the people think."

"I gathered that much. For your information, Alvia, I was once a worker very much like you in a world where, even if its politics were divided, its peoples were more or less happy. I travelled Time for an experiment and discovered my arrival had been expected, that I had already become a despot! I never have given any orders during Time-travel: it is a complete impossibility. It seems to me I'm being used as a shield for the gang who are running this planet, Mars, Venus and Mercury. Because I didn't like the way things looked I saw the workers for

myself. I'm glad I did. I managed to save you from a good deal of unpleasantness."

The girl lowered her gaze and Jerry stood looking at her thoughtfully. The more he was in her company the more he liked her. He did not feel quite so alone in this crazy world of 3950. Then he glanced up as the doors opened and a servant came in. He was one of the men who, so far, had been doing menial tasks.

"Your name?" Jerry asked him briefly.

"Jandos, Excellence."

"From here on you are my personal bodyguard, and I hold you responsible for the safety of this young woman. If anything happens to her you will answer with your life. Your salary will be adjusted by the Financial Controller to fit your promotion."

"Your Excellence is most kind," Jandos said eagerly. "I . . ."

Jerry waved a hand briefly. "See that this young woman has a comfortable suite and put two women in charge of her . . ." Then as the girl rose to her feet he added in a quieter voice: "We will talk further when you are feeling rested, Alvia. Meanwhile, do not hesitate to ask for anything you need."

She nodded shyly and went from the room with Jandos marching behind her. She had hardly gone before the doors opened again and Nafrin came in. With measured tread he crossed the waste of shining floor.

"I have returned the aircraft to the roof, Excellence," he announced sourly, and stood with his hands clasped ready to crack his knuckles.

Jerry swung on him, his blue eyes hard. The earlier conviction he had sensed that he was beginning to enjoy being a ruler was now doubly strong. He was commencing to find out just how much authority he really had.

"Zem met with an accident," he said. "You gave orders for his body to be disintegrated—without consulting me. Why was that?"

"I hardly considered it necessary to mention such a trifle, Excellence. Further, I did not know your whereabouts."

"You said you followed me by television. Had you wanted to consult me, you could have done. I suggest, Nafrin, that it was in your own interest to be rid of Zem. He knew rather too much, didn't he?"

Nafrin did not answer. He stood watching as Jerry climbed out of his workers' uniform and threw it on one side. Jerry gave him a grim glance.

"Zem, to me, was a friendly young man," he said. "I suspect you caused his death, Nafrin, but I cannot prove it. I'm warning you, though, that if anybody else suffers hurt because they happen to be close to me you'll answer yourself. With your life."

"You are threatening me,.. Excellence?" Nafrin enquired.

"I am. I have the impression you thought you had a ruler who would be a fool because he came from an age two thousand years old. I am correcting that impression right now. As I said earlier, since I am ruler I intend to behave like one. Now, sit at the desk please; I have one or two matters to discuss."

Nafrin did not like the peremptory way in which he was being treated, and showed as much. With an impatient swish of his robe he seated himself and waited for Jerry to do likewise at the opposite side of the desk.

"What length of shift do the workers do?" Jerry asked, drawing a thin sheet of metallic paper towards him ready for notes.

"Fifteen hours each, Excellence. Work is maintained day and night."

"For the conquest of the outer planets, I take it? The workers are preparing the necessary machines, weapons of war, and all the rest of it?"

Nafrin nodded, his pale eyes showing he did not wish to commit himself.

"And how much are the workers paid?"

"They are not. To pay a worker is asking for trouble. They receive free living in return for their services. That is all."

"Then how are they ever expected to climb to eminence, and become eligible for these Heights of Olympus?"

"They are *not* expected to," Nafrin retorted.

"Got them well under the thumb, haven't you?" Jerry gave a grim smile. "And blaming it all on me! All part of my orders whilst I travelled Time, I suppose?"

Nafrin gave the slightest of starts.

"That girl worker told me," Jerry explained. "I gather you have been building me up into a monster power for evil, turning me into a cat's paw, thinking you could handle me when I finally showed up and leaving me to take the blame for all that has happened—and is likely to happen. However, I'm not such a damned fool as you think. First I'm cutting all working hours on this planet by half. Second, State domiciles will be abolished and the people allowed to choose where they shall live. Third, they shall be paid at a fixed rate for work done. And lastly, those of exceptional ability who pass a certain examination will be permitted to enter these higher regions where wealth and evil dominance has been holding sway far too long."

"It is madness!" Nafrin declared, his calm deserting him. "We must work at full pressure to conquer the outer planets."

"That, too, is out," Jerry retorted. "I don't give a hang for the Interplanetary Council or any other body formed whilst I was between Times. I'm concerned

only for the laws *I* make and the power *I* possess. Since you have established me as the ruler you'll do as I say. If you kill me off you'll have to take the blame for all future decrees—and considering how harsh they would be you wouldn't live long in the revolution which would ensue. The people would pin everything on you if I were removed."

Nafrin's knuckles clicked as he pulled at them savagely.

"And stop doing that!" Jerry added. Then after a pause, during which he made notes, he asked a question: "What is the name of that guard whom I thrashed in the foundry?"

"I cannot be expected to know!"

"I still have a title," Jerry commented, pressing a button; then to the Controller of Communications he said: "Put me in touch with Miss Alvia Menron, Worker 126. I am not quite sure which suite she is in."

There was a pause, Nafrin waiting in smouldering calm. Then the girl's voice came through the loudspeaker.

"Miss Menron, what is the name of the overseer I dealt with in the foundry?" Jerry asked.

"Haspus, Excellence."

"Would you say he is more or less brutal than the other guards?"

"There is little to choose between them, Excellence. They all have absolute authority over the workers—and use it."

"Thank you." Jerry switched off and met Nafrin's cold eyes.

"Order has to be maintained," Nafrin insisted.

"Not by brutes of that sort. I'm discharging every work—manual. It's about all they are fit for. Except one of them commencing tomorrow — not only there, but everywhere they exist. They can do some other

Haspus. He is going to be punished—and severely. He lashed the ruler of the world."

"He was not aware of it at the time," Nafrin said.

"That is your fault, my friend. You should have been quicker televising my image. That barbarian will get a taste of his own whip and a month's solitary confinement. Maybe that will give him a chance to reflect."

Nafrin got to his feet impatiently. "If your Excellence will permit me I will withdraw . . ."

"I haven't finished with you yet, Nafrin. Your signature is needed to the decrees I just mentioned."

Jerry turned and summoned a robot from the wall. To it he repeated his decrees in legal form and finished with orders to have the decrees printed immediately. The robot turned and went to other quarters of the great building, every detail clear in its photographic brain.

"I do not agree with your decrees, Excellence, and I will not sign them!" Nafrin said, his mouth tight.

"I think you will," Jerry replied, "otherwise you will cease forthwith to be World Secretary. With that tremendous influence gone, where will you be?"

Nafrin sat down again slowly, his thin face set viciously.

"Though you are the ruler, Excellence, there are only certain limits to which you can go," he snapped. "During your transition generations passed, in which time new laws and institutions grew up. I have been trained to administer those laws. You cannot wipe them out by a couple of signatures."

"I can—and I shall." Jerry sat back in his chair. "If you don't like the way I run things try and depose me. You will not find that very easy. The workers know now that I intend to help them. My sudden disappearance, perhaps by an 'accident', would hardly improve things for you."

Beaten for the moment Nafrin said no more. Presently he glanced up as the robot returned, bringing printed sheets of flexible metal in his pincer-hand. He laid them on the desk and then retreated to the wall.

"Quite satisfactory," Jerry pronounced, when he had read them through. He signed his name with a stylo-pen and handed it across. "Your signature, Nafrin, beneath mine."

"Technically," Nafrin said, signing his name, "these decrees are not legal without the sanction of the Union of Four."

"I do not recognise that Union—as I told you. You refuse to give me exact details about it and you hedge when I seek an interview. That being so I shall abolish it. Henceforth all decisions will be made by me."

Nafrin added his signature to the last document and rose to his feet, his austere features rigid.

"Have I your permission to withdraw, Excellence?" he asked frigidly.

"Yes, you can go. I'll summon you when I need you. I will inform the people by radio of my decisions and the new laws will come into force tomorrow."

Nafrin turned without a word and swept out of the chamber, closing the doors heavily behind him. Jerry grinned a little then relaxed, thinking.

CHAPTER THREE

Following his planet-wide broadcast, Jerry implemented his pledges the following day and the new order came into being for the workers of the giant city—and of the cities in all other parts of the world. As far as he could tell from the information culled by his scouts, reaction to his decrees was favourable. His position as ruler was more respected than it had been: hatred for him did not seem so rife.

For his own part he was more interested in one worker in particular—Alvia Menron, and towards noon the following day he visited her suite and was admitted by the woman who had become the girl's personal maid.

Alvia herself was seated at the window of the huge lounge, looking out over the majestic city, when Jerry entered. She rose immediately and bowed. Jerry smiled in response, noticing how much more delectable she looked in the borrowed finery of a woman of the Upper Level. Rest, too, had improved her. Her prettiness had taken on a more robust quality.

"I am honoured, Excellence," she said, as he paused a few feet away from her..

"You are comfortable here, Alvia?"

"I could not fail to be, Excellence. And," the girl hurried on, her grey eyes bright, "I heard your broadcast to the world, wiping out the workers' quarters and giving them a chance to live. I realise now, as thousands of others must do, how utterly mistaken I was in thinking you a despot. I can only assume Nafrin was to blame for that?"

Jerry nodded and settled down on the window seat. When he motioned the girl seated herself near him, the blaze of the morning sun outlining her straight features in detail.

"I have made another decision, Alvia," Jerry said, after a moment. "You will become my personal secretary when you feel that you are rested enough to resume normal duties."

Alvia stared at him in amazement. "I, a worker, personal secretary to the ruler?" she cried. "But—but it is utterly unheard of!"

"Not any more. And workers, as such, no longer exist. Please remember that. I am assuming you will accept the position?"

"But of course, Excellence! But will Nafrin approve? Is he not secretary, too?"

"World Secretary. That's a very different thing. I am supposed to be content with robots to perform the duties of assistants, but I'm human enough to prefer flesh-and-blood."

This time the girl only nodded, the sunlight catching the waves in her blonde hair. Jerry hesitated for a moment and then continued :

"Chiefly, Alvia, I need the confidence of somebody who is accustomed to this strange age. I have to learn everything as I go, and I find it complicated. As my secretary you will be able to help me over the difficult parts. For instance, I am at a loss to understand how so many people got themselves tied down in slavery. What

really happened? What brought the Union of Four into being?"

"According to history it was the invasion from Jupiter which did it," Alvia replied, and Jerry gave a start.

"From Jupiter? But I thought the outer planets had yet to be conquered! So Nafrin told me, anyway."

"Possibly Saturn, Uranus and Neptune have to be—but Jupiter is already inhabited, on that eight-thousand mile strip which scientists call 'The Great Red Spot'. It represents the only solid land in an otherwise molten world. Or so I hear."

"I'm learning things," Jerry said, full of attention. "I was told that Earth-people, after they had picked themselves from the atomic war of 1970, entered on a campaign of aggression and conquered Mars, Venus and Mercury in turn."

"Earth people had nothing to do with it," Alvia replied seriously. "Naturally, it all happened long before my time, but our history recorders are accurate. What actually happened was that many centuries passed after the 1970 atomic war before anything like a reasonable civilisation began to reappear. Then in the year 2370 the Jovian invaders came. They had vast scientific power and swept through Earth, Venus, Mars and Mercury like a forest fire, winning complete mastery in the space of one short year. Apparently they had been preparing for the onslaught for a very long time. Their first investigations of the Earth and other worlds had taken place as long ago as your own time—1950. Their machines had been seen, too, and given the name of 'flying saucers'."

"So that's what they were!" Jerry murmured. "Go on, Alvia."

"Jovian control was instituted," she continued. "Many men of Jove—and women too—came and

settled on Earth, Venus and Mars. Not Mercury, because it is too inhospitable except for those born to it. But the Jovians use synthetic bodies, patterned after the style of the natural inhabitants of the planet on which they live. Normally a Jovian is squat and powerful. In fact he *has* to be to bear up under the terrific gravity of the giant planet . . . So you see," the girl finished, "the men and women you see today in the Upper Levels, who enjoy prosperity and plenty, are actually Jovians using synthetic bodies, into which their brains have been surgically transferred. Nafrin himself must, I imagine, be a Jovian. Certainly he is a very powerful emissary of the ruling faction."

"No wonder he makes me feel cold," Jerry muttered. "From the first moment I set eyes on him I felt revolted and could not quite understand why. He's so unemotional, so inhuman. And I suppose some of his servants are really Jovians, too?"

"Practically everybody in the Upper Level is a Jovian, using an Earth-formed body. But I am not, and you are not. We are born of Earth. I was subjected, but you—because of machinations in high places—are allowed to be in the Upper Level and assume the powers of ruler."

"So I can be a buffer between Nafrin and the people," Jerry snapped. "I've no illusions about that. The Jovians thought I would prove to be a mug because I'm two thousand years behind them, but I happen to have my own individuality. Obviously, the conquest of the outer planets is just a continuation of the Jovian dream of dominating the System." —

"And finally the Universe," Alvia said quietly. "They will stop at nothing, Excellence. They are brilliantly scientific, utterly without mercy. What I cannot understand is why, now you have taken things into your own hands, they do not wipe you out."

"They probably will do their best before I'm much

older." Jerry's face was grim for a moment. "It's pretty certain that they will not allow one man, who has proved tougher than they thought, to stand in the way of Universal conquest. The only way to escape that is to destroy them first."

"Which," Alvia said slowly, "is impossible! Everything is ranged on their side, Excellence."

Jerry reflected for a moment or two, his brow troubled. Then he asked a question.

"About this Union of Four, Alvia—the Interplanetary Council. I imagine that it comprises the master-minds from whom Nafrin takes his instructions."

"Yes, I suppose so. I don't know much about it, except that it is all powerful. Its headquarters are on Jupiter — the Great Red Spot. That information is known. That is where our lords and masters reside. In the Council is one representative of Venus, Mars, Mercury and Earth. They are supposed to agree with everything the Jovians say—and they do, because they can't help themselves."

"Puppet emperors, eh?" Jerry asked, with a grim smile. "Just the same idea as in my time, only we did it with countries and here they do it with planets. Which explains much: why nobody would tell me where the Council meets, and sundry other matters. I wish I knew exactly how to get in touch with them. I might find a way to straighten things out without recourse to the violence which I am afraid is coming."

"Violence?" Alvia repeated, plainly dismayed at the very thought of it.

"You cannot uproot a usurper without it," Jerry sighed. "I feel my position as ruler keenly. I too am a puppet, but with the one difference that I don't intend to remain one. At the moment I'm a grain of sand in the gigantic universe-conquering machine which the Jovians have set up."

"Then that makes me a grain, too," Alvia said, "because I shall stand by you in whatever you do, Excellence."

Jerry smiled. "One thing you can do," he said. "Call me 'Jerry'. This 'Excellence' business is getting on my nerves : it reminds me of my school reports when I was a kid—and come to think of it it wasn't often I got anything marked 'Excellent', either!"

"But surely I cannot refer to the World ruler as 'Jerry'?"

"Why not? You call Nafrin by his name, don't you, instead of World Secretary. That's an order!" Jerry said sternly, getting to his feet. "Next thing we . . ."

He paused as the woman servant came into the room. She looked across at him.

"World Secretary Nafrin wishes to speak to you on the visi-phone, Excellence," she announced.

Jerry looked surprised and then nodded. "Thanks. I'll take it here."

He crossed to the table in the centre of the room and switched on the instrument. Immediately the austere features of the Jovian in an Earth-body appeared on the scanning screen. He looked as coldly respectful and unemotional as ever.

"Forgive the intrusion, Excellence," he apologised. "I was informed by your bodyguard that you were in Worker 126's suite. I require your permission to leave my normal duties for a while."

"Indeed?" Jerry's eyes became sharp. "Where do you intend going?"

"At this period, Excellence, it is my duty to make a routine visit to the inner planets, just to determine matters of policy. I shall also have to explain personally your own—er—sweeping changes in the law on this planet."

Jerry thought swiftly. "How long do you expect to be absent?"

"Possibly four or six weeks."

"Very well, Nafrin, I shall understand." Jerry switched off and turned thoughtful eyes to the girl as she sat looking at him. Then he went to a small table in the corner on which stood writing materials. On a sheet of the customary metallic foil he wrote a brief note.

The girl read it, her eyebrows rising in surprise.

It is more than possible that Nafrin has overheard our conversation in here. He has many rooms wired through to his own personal quarters. Say no more for the moment but come out with me on to the terrace. There we can talk more or less freely.

Jerry nodded towards the great windows, opened them, and then led the way out on to the terrace which stretched in the form of a gigantic balcony outside. The girl followed him and joined him at the parapet. In silence Jerry looked over the mighty city for a moment or two.

"I feel like taking a long chance," he said finally, and the girl turned her big grey eyes to him.

"In what way, Excel—I—I mean Jerry?"

"As I said on that note, I think Nafrin my have heard our discussion. That being so he knows I'm going to be a constant thorn in his side from here on — but he obviously will not be able to do anything to me until he has the sanction of those for whom he works — the Union of Four. I don't believe this bunk of his about a routine tour. I'll stake everything I've got that he's heading into space to discuss matters with the conquerors. On Jupiter's Red Spot, I mean."

"It's possible," Alvia admitted,

"Possible enough for me to want to follow him—far enough behind to escape being seen in his telescopic equipment. I know the spaceships use atomic power. There is a way to follow him. One of those compasses which are sensitive to the magnets in which the power plant is housed."

"I have heard of them . . ." Alvia's eyes took on a sudden brightness. "I see what you mean!" she exclaimed. "This is possibly one excellent chance to follow him to the exact spot where the Union has its headquarters?"

"Right! It would be an almost hopeless task otherwise. From what little I know of Jupiter it is one of the most frightful worlds in the System—but if we can pinpoint the place we want I might at least get a chance to speak to this Union, or Interplanetary Council, face to face . . . If of course I'm wrong, and Nafrin is only making a routine trip after all, I can return home."

"As your secretary I should come with you," Alvia said.

"It would be too dangerous," Jerry told her. "To say nothing of unethical. You and I — alone in the depths of space."

"I'm not afraid of the prospect, Jerry."

Jerry considered the girl for a moment and then smiled.

"I'd certainly be glad of company," he admitted, "and there is nobody I trust as much as you . . . However, for the moment I'd better leave you and make sure where Nafrin is heading for. I'll contact you again the moment I know."

He left the terrace quickly and then hurried from the suite. Back in his own headquarters he gave instructions to the astronomical department to keep track of the journeys of all space machines leaving Earth during

the next few hours. Knowing that none of them plied regularly between Jupiter and Earth, it would mean that any vessel heading in the direction of the giant world must be Nafrin's.

This done, Jerry summoned Jandos, his new bodyguard, and from him learned every detail in connection with the control of a space machine, finally submitting his knowledge to the test by piloting one of the cigar-shaped machines to a distance of a thousand miles from Earth and back again. To Jerry, who had never been beyond the atmosphere before it was an exhilarating experience. He returned to Earth with the vision of coal-black space and its endless brazenly glittering stars still clear in his mind.

"You have been very co-operative, Jandos," he told the bodyguard, when they had both returned to headquarters. "I shall not forget you for it."

"My pleasure, Excellence. I assume you intend to make a space journey?"

"I do. I think it time I got acquainted with the worlds I rule . . ." Jerry paused for a moment, then asked an outright question. "Jandos, were you born on Jupiter or Earth?"

"Earth, Excellence. I used to be a worker and then asked for transfer to the Higher Level as a guard and servant, about the only task an Earth-born man or woman is permitted to fill in this sector."

"And Zem? Was he too an Earthman? Not a Jovian with an Earth body?"

"He was an Earthman, Excellence—one of the finest I ever met."

"There are going to be changes, Jandos," Jerry promised him. "Our world is subjugated: that subjugation must be — and shall be — broken. I am leaving on a space tour to survey the possibilities. Nafrin also will

be absent. I will leave all instructions with the recording machines and it will be your duty to carry out those instructions. Where you have a matter beyond you, it must remain in abeyance until I return. I do not expect anything unusual to happen. The workers will be too busy re-habilitating themselves to bring up any problems beyond your scope."

"I am honoured by your trust in me, Excellence."

Jerry clapped him on the shoulder. "I've always been a good judge of character, Jandos, and I don't think I'm mistaken. Besides, you are an Earthman—I suppose there are other Earth men and women, even in the Higher Levels?"

"Only in the most menial positions, Excellence . . ."

Jandos paused as the visi-phone buzzed for attention. Jerry switched on and the face of one of the city astronomers came on the screen.

"One machine is leaving Earth at the moment, Excellence," he reported. "Not the usual type of vessel."

"Where is it headed?"

"Towards the orbit of Mars, Excellence."

Jerry frowned. "You mean the vessel is making for Mars?"

"No, Excellence, only towards the Martian orbit. Mars does not seem to be this traveller's destination since he is heading away from the red planet."

"Thank you," Jerry said, and switched off. Then to Jandos he added: "You have your instructions, Jandos. I am leaving you in charge from here on. I have much to do."

Jerry departed to a vision of Jandos bowing low and hurried back to the suite of Alvia. He found her in her usual position at the window as he entered the main room. Dismissing the servant he went over to the girl.

"I believe he is on his way," he said quickly. "Are you still prepared to risk coming with me?"

There was no hesitation in her answer. "Of course,

Jerry. Whatever you do, I am anxious to support—especially if it will help others on this planet. After all, I'm an Earth woman."

"All right, let's go." Jerry took her arm and hurried her from the chamber. He kept her beside him until he had reached the enormous roof-top parking area, where aircraft and space machines stood side by side. He signalled one of the maintenance staff across to him.

"Have you seen the World Secretary?" he asked.

"Yes, Excellence. He departed some time ago in a solo space machine, bound for routine inspection."

Jerry nodded, a gleam in his eye. "Return below and inform the servant in Suite 17 that Miss Menron, Worker 126, will be absent indefinitely."

The maintenance man saluted promptly and hurried away. Jerry helped the girl into the control cabin of a medium-sized space machine and then closed the air-lock.

"Everything is ready for the journey, Alvia," he explained to her, nodding towards the storage lockers in the belly of the machine. "This is the vessel in which I learned how to fly space. I had it provisioned and supplied with all necessities. We have a long journey before us."

"I'm looking forward to it." There was eagerness in the girl's eyes. "I have never yet been into space."

"Only my second trip," Jerry said, settling in the control seat beside her, "so we can enjoy it together. Since Jupiter is about four hundred million miles away we'll have plenty of time to look around us . . ."

He switched on the power plant and moved the speed control. With only a deep humming as the power was transferred to the rocket tubes the machine rose swiftly above the vast building and then began a rapid climb into the cloudless blue sky.

Notch by notch Jerry advanced the speed lever and

in ever mounting acceleration the machine hurtled to the limits of the atmosphere, then through it into the eternal black of space. A gasp of wonder escaped the girl and she jerked her eyes quickly away from the unimaginable glory of the unmasked sun, its prominences and corona streaming into the void.

Jerry swung the machine in an arc and the sun and brilliant moon moved through a half-circle. Alvia looked ahead of her again on a waste of stars with, here and there, the steady glow of a planet. Every one of them was identifiable now the tremoring of the atmosphere had been removed. Mars, Venus, Mercury —then beyond in the distances loomed green Jupiter, and, receding into remoteness, Saturn, Uranus and Neptune. As yet small Pluto, on the rim of the System, was not visible. Jerry looked back at the Earth, a jigsaw puzzle of countries and oceans, then ahead to Jupiter. The tiny speck of the solo machine carrying Nafrin was not apparent — but it became so quickly enough when Jerry switched on the photonometer, a device for gathering light-photons and magnifying them to a tremendous degree. In the screen the solitary silver speck of the hurtling one-man vessel was quite distinct.

"I suppose he can see us since we can see him?" Alvia asked, glancing at Jerry quickly.

"I think not. I had Jandos spray this machine with an instantly drying black preparation which prevents light reflection. Black on black is invisible — so I imagine we shall be. Probably Nafrin would have done likewise to his vessel had he considered the possibility of my following him."

Jerry snapped a button on the control panel and watched the big compass face as the activating power surged through the needle—but nothing happened.

"Too far away to influence it yet," he said, switching off again. "This compass is a giant version of the

wrist-type explorers on other worlds use to find their way back to their vessel. Once we come within range it will follow Nafrin's machine wherever it may go."

There was a long silence. Jerry still mounted the acceleration gently until at last the gauges showed that it reached a point where it produced an inertia equal to the gravity of the Earth's surface, and therefore it was possible to move in comfort. He switched off the power plant. A given velocity having been obtained it was time to cruise freely in space, never losing a fraction of speed, because of lack of resistance and the now weak pull of Earth's own field. A current passing through the floor plates produced an artificial gravity which took the place of that produced by mounting acceleration.

"Time we had a meal," Jerry said. "The automatic pilot will take care of this lot."

He switched it on and got to his feet. Alvia doing likewise.

"I'll fix the meal while you attend to other things," she said. "You'll want to work out what sort of a planet we're heading for, won't you?"

He nodded and turned to the information machine in which was recorded in absolute detail all known facts about every planet in the System. And the facts concerning Jupiter were by no means reassuring. He read out the salient ones as he and Alvia sat at their meal of concentrates and restorative fluid.

"Atmosphere is pure ammoniated hydrogen," he said. "Which makes it impossible for oxygen breathers like you and me to exist in it. I can only assume that Jovians with synthetic Earth bodies live under a protective dome, otherwise they'd die instantly in that rank poison . . . constantly swept by hurricanes, in which a wind velocity of five hundred miles an hour is not uncommon. Our weight will be so tremendous we shall

hardly be able to drag one foot in front of the other. We will need the special space-suits of sprung metal-mesh and rubber to prevent the atmosphere and gravitational pressure crushing us . . . in fact," Jerry finished, with a wry glance, "we look like enjoying ourselves tremendously!"

"Unless we can find the spot where Nafrin settles and so cut out all the uncomfortable part," Alvia responded. "Whatever may be ahead of us we'll face it, because we must."

* * *

Days, measured by the chronometer, were added to days in the unchanging, glittering deeps of space as the machine flew onwards. It crossed the orbit of Mars, last of the inner planets, and then plunged into the wastes which yawned between the red planet and Jupiter itself. For Jerry and Alvia it was a period of intense monotony, their only excitement being the checking of Nafrin's progress at intervals to be sure he really *was* heading for Jove—and plainly he was.

He went through the area of the asteroids, lying between Mars and Jove, and Jerry got his biggest headache when he had to negotiate his vessel through this whirling wilderness of rocks, small asteroids, planetoids and showers of cosmic dust. There were moments when he feared the machine would be smashed to powder in the midst of the onslaught, but somehow he came through it and space was empty again ahead. And Jupiter was much larger, his queer cloud-bank formation clearly marked and the Great Red Spot, 8,000 miles in extent, occasionally visible.

Nearer came the mighty world, and still nearer, his nine moons floating in majestic attendance upon him. The cloud banks, as distance lessened, took on movement—until it was plain that they were gyrating around

the vast world at a tremendous speed, driven by the equatorial hurricanes which raged forever throughout the ammoniated hydrogen atmosphere.

There was a terrible loneliness about this part of space which made Jerry feel unexpectedly frightened. It made him wonder if he was attempting too much with too little knowledge. He gazed forward towards that frightful world in utter fascination. Alvia, too, was plainly ill-at-ease, though she tried not to show it. As yet there was no danger, but once the vessel reached that storm-convulsed atmospheric belt anything might happen. Inexperienced in space travel they might easily be whirled to destruction.

"You think — we should go on?" Jerry asked at length, as if he had read the girl's mind.

"We've come four hundred million miles, Jerry," she reminded him. "That's an awful long way to no purpose. Yes—I think we should go on. We know which route Nafrin is taking because the compass is functioning now . . ." and the girl glanced across to where the needle swung, following the dim speck of Nafrin's ship now visible against the swirling green of cloud banks.

"Okay—we go to it," Jerry said quietly, and he settled himself at the controls. "In a matter of two more hours we'll hit that atmosphere."

Less, as it happened. Jupiter swept ever nearer, pulling with his enormous gravitational field. There came a moment when he filled all the void, then the machine had struck his atmosphere and plunged instantly into green fog which seemed, owing to Jupiter's great distance from the sun, to be impenetrably dark.

Jerry watched his instruments intently, flying blind. He saw the girl's profile white and strained, reflected in the black glass of the outlook port. Outside swirled pea-green vapour, deadly poison, and the spaceship was being flung along at a speed of over 2,000 miles an hour, driven by an irresistible hurricane. Its noise was

apparent even through the immensely thick walls of the vessel.

"Hope to heaven there are no mountains," Jerry muttered. "Going at this rate we'll be smack into them before the radar screens can give us sufficient warning."

In this Jerry revealed his meagre knowledge of the hell planet to which he had come. On Jupiter the mountains were no more than a hundred feet high—were only hills in fact — held down by the appalling drag of the gravity. At its present height of 30,000 feet, according to the altimeter, the vessel was safe enough.

"Watch that compass, Alvia," Jerry instructed. "When the needle stops and points to one spot let me know."

"Right," the girl said, and fixed her attention upon it.

Thereafter it seemed to Jerry that he flew blind for several hours, always dropping, but by very slow degrees, to find that the vapours did not cease—until he reached an altitude of 2,000 feet. Then suddenly they had gone and instead there was blackness outside. The blackness of the Pit.

"Night or day?" Alvia whispered. "This horrible world terrifies me, Jerry!"

"Nafrin still going?" he asked tautly, to break her absorption with the unnerving surroundings.

"Yes—still ahead of us. Maybe he's making a round circuit of the planet."

"That wouldn't make sense. No, he's evidently a long way from his destination. Don't forget Jupiter has a diameter of eighty-four thousand miles . . . Wonder if Nafrin's got tabs on us and knows he's being followed, so he's giving us a run for our money!"

"Maybe—but I don't see how he could know. He could not have spotted this black machine."

Jerry ceased talking for a moment and switched on a battery of three atomic-light probes in the base of the machine. They cast an enormous circle of daylight brilliance on the terrain of Jupiter as the vessel hurtled across it. The planet was composed of alternate areas of rocky landscape and molten metal. A world still hot, still vomiting its fuming inner contents. A world of terror, darkness, and screaming poisonous gas.

"Heaven help us if the motors fail," Jerry muttered.

But they did not. They were the finest product of 3950 science and the power plant continued to sing its sweet, unhurried purr as the vessel hurtled onward. Then Alvia gave an exclamation.

"He's going down, Jerry! Look, the needle's sinking!"

Jerry glanced at it and gave a burst to the forward rockets which had the effect of braking the vessel's onward rush. He slowed down until he was only moving at a mere hundred miles an hour, still using the front rockets to brace the vessel against the savage gale which drove it onwards.

He watched the needle intently. It swung downwards and when it had reached the maximum vertical, tip down, he looked through the outlook port, the atomic-lights switched off. For the first time he and Alvia saw a glimpse of life in this fantastic wilderness. It looked rather like a gigantic city, brilliantly illuminated, yet distorted. Then it was gone as the machine travelled onwards.

Jerry turned the vessel about, and gave the power plant nearly half current in order to fight back into the teeth of the hurricane. Slowly he returned over the lighted area and surveyed it intently.

"Yes, a city," he confirmed, as Alvia looked with him, "It looks distorted because it's covered with some kind of transparent dome. Notice the rocks around it? Red in colour. This area must be part of the Red Spot, the only known solid continent on all Jupiter."

"Then what do we do?" Alvia asked, as the lighted city again faded into distance.

"Land, and see if there's a way in. Nafrin must know of one, so we might find it too."

The girl was silent, her face pale. Jerry gave her a grim glance.

"I know what you're thinking—landing in this will be hell itself, but we have to do it if we can."

He began to turn again, moving once more into the wind, and finally he tilted the machine's nose down steeply and brought the vessel to the rocky ground within perhaps half-a-mile of where the buried city lay. The humming of the power plant ceased.

CHAPTER FOUR

"Well, this is it," Jerry said at length, giving the girl a glance. "Time to venture outside."

"Any use trying the radio?" she asked. "They might hear us and suggest some means of entry. It seems to me that going out there is suicide."

Jerry moved across to the radio equipment and switched it on, but though he gave repeated signals there was no response. He turned, shrugged, and cut off the power.

"No course but to try and find a way into the city," he said. "The dome must have an opening somewhere otherwise Nafrin could not have got inside."

"And apparently in his vessel as well," Alvia pointed out. "The compass still points obliquely downwards."

Jerry went to the belly of the machine and from the big storage cupboard lifted out two of the heavy space-suits of metal-mesh and rubber. It took him and Alvia nearly ten minutes to get into them and operate the various gadgets. There were air cylinders on the back, audiophones to make conversation possible, and a magnetic system in the boot soles to lessen or increase the strain of varying gravities. With the magnetism reduced to zero to counteract Jupiter's vast pull Jerry clumped to the airlock and opened it. Then he clambered outside and helped Alvia's bloated form down after him.

Instantly, away from the safety of the control room and its artificial gravity, the terrific power of Jupiter had them in its grip. Savage wind tore at them, but so heavy was the gravity they did not overbalance. Clinging to each other—both wearing a compass to find the way back to the lighted space machine—they began

a slow advance towards the spot where they had seen the city.

They did not communicate with each other : breathing was a tough enough job without wasting any of it on speech. They just kept going, peering into the near-darkness of the Jovian day, whilst overhead there swirled the intense green canopy of poisonous vapours.

It took them half-an-hour to cover the distance over the red plain to a mighty hemispherical dome. It gleamed faintly as it caught reflections from the green vapours. Hanging on to each other in the furious wind Jerry and the girl peered through the curvature of the dome and down into depths where a perfect city lay, brilliantly lighted—serene, secure. A haven on a hell planet.

"Obviously we weren't mistaken," Jerry said through his audiophone.

"But how do we get into it?" the girl asked. "I can't see any sign of a break anywhere . . ."

She broke off in alarm as suddenly something invisible caught hold of her. She was whirled from Jerry's grip and went floating through the air helplessly, turning somersaults as she went. Jerry stared after her in horror, then before he could make an attempt to go after her he too was lifted from the ground and borne along in a series of rotations and twirls which made him giddy.

It was not the gale which was moving him—or Alvia. It was some kind of force from which he could not break free. And it continued to grip him as the moments passed, speeding him along in the wake of the girl—until she suddenly appeared to fall head over heels into the ground. A second or two later Jerry realised that he was following her into a kind of valve. Behind him a heavy cover closed, then he was in a dimly-lighted shaft, tumbling downwards, still held by that mysterious power.

As gently as a bubble he came to rest at length in the

midst of dull grey light, to find Alvia, quite unhurt, lying beside him.

"What — what happened?" she asked in bewilderment, through the audiophone.

"No idea. Some kind of levitation trick, I suppose. Since we are dealing with super-scientists I suppose it's one of their playful little ways."

He stopped abruptly as the grey light suddenly changed to brilliant white before the opening of a slide.

It became apparent then to Jerry and Alvia that they were inside a kind of small chamber, which evidently lay at the base of the shaft down which they had come. They looked through their helmet visors upon a gigantic brightly lighted hall filled with instruments . . . and men. And creatures.

"Look," Alvia whispered. "There's Nafrin in the middle distance, motioning us to come out."

"Uh-huh." Jerry scrambled to his feet and helped the girl up beside him. "Suppose we've no choice but to obey."

He stepped through the opening and into the enormous laboratory. A mere glance at the machines satisfied him that he would never be able to comprehend them, so he did not try. Instead he advanced to where Nafrin was standing, Alvia coming up in the rear.

"You have no need to continue wearing your space-suit, Excellence," Nafrin commented. "Neither has Worker 126. The air in here is quite normal, otherwise I would not be breathing it."

Jerry's eyes strayed beyond the World Secretary to one or two other men — who looked very much like Earthlings—then beyond them to the strangest caricatures which had ever stepped out of a scientific nightmare. They were grouped in tiers behind a thick glass screen which rose fifty feet into the air, and around them swirled a faint green mist. In appearance they were rather like crocodiles, except that their eyes were obviously highly intelligent.

"Jovians," Nafrin said dryly, divining Jerry's thoughts. "They can hear and see everything, but are sealed off in their own area so they can breathe normal ammoniated hydrogen. Over there you see a Venusian representative. There is a Martian—and there a Mercurian."

Jerry glanced at them each in turn. The Venusian was flabby and doughlike, but not too unusual in appearance, while the Martian was big-headed, red-skinned, and seven feet tall. Both he and his interplanetary colleague were attired in regal looking garments and seemed to have no difficulty in breathing the oxy-hydrogen atmosphere. The Mercurian, however, was breathing heavily, as though he found the air too dense. He was enormous in height, fully ten feet tall, ridiculously thin, his body apparently encased in black scales. Dressed in ornamental regalia he reminded Jerry of a deep-sea fish.

So much Jerry noticed, then he clambered out of his stuffy space-suit and allowed it to fall in folds to the floor. He glanced at Alvia as she too emerged, pushing the tumbled blonde hair from her face.

"You under-estimate me, Excellence," Nafrin commented, stroking his knuckles. "I not only heard your conversation in the suite of Worker 126, but also on the terrace, from which I gathered you would follow me."

"Up to all the tricks, in fact?" Jerry asked coldly.

"Precisely." Nafrin smiled without warmth. "I came here on purpose, Excellence, since I gathered you would follow. I had a double reason in doing so—one, to withdraw your not inconsiderable influence from Earth and allow my agents a free hand; and the other, to dispose of you. Completely! Since you left Earth of your free will nobody can ever blame *me* for your non-return. I shall be as 'surprised' as anybody at your failure to return home."

"And Alvia?" Jerry asked, thinking fast.

"This worker?" Nafrin looked at her in contempt.

"She will be returned to the working ranks. There is no sense in killing a working unit, especially since she will not be able to tell what she knows."

"I assume you have some bright little notion like cutting out her tongue, or something?" Jerry demanded.

"No. Controlling her will so that she, in common with all other workers on all the other planets, will no longer have any individuality. Far from having their freedom, as you have arranged it, Excellence, they will all of them be more subjected! Arrangements have been made for every worker to be controlled by mass hypnosis. Thus they will remain, until they die. We would have used the method long ago only we had the hope that we could rule by apparently normal methods, with you as mouthpiece. That is not to be. Hypnosis from this world has been established and embraces all four worlds. That much has been accomplished whilst you have been space travelling."

"Are you willing to explain how such a miracle of science has been accomplished?" Jerry asked. "Personally I think you are bluffing."

"I am not, Excellence." Nafrin gave his cold smile. "And I do not intend to explain, either. I have followed out the orders of my superiors, they who rule the System and who will finally rule the Universe."

Nafrin motioned towards the "crocodiles" in the sealed case and Jerry looked at them in stony contempt, Alvia by his side.

"Despite their physical forms, they have intelligence far above that of any other planet." Nafrin said. "Others of their race are responsible for the hypnotic control now ruling the System. You were brought down here with this worker, Excellence, by means of levitator beams. We could have destroyed you in the surface, since we knew exactly where you were, but it was necessary to first depose you from office. That I am doing now in the name of my superiors. At the same time the Union of Four is dissolved and — you having

learned so much—the Interplanetary Council also ceases to be. Instead there are only Jovians in control. You could have been useful had you not proven so individual. As it is you are too dangerous to use. You, and the representatives of Mars, Venus and Mercury"—Nafrin nodded to each of them in turn—"are going to be eliminated. Not by a lethal weapon, but in the manner our interplanetary law prescribes. You will each be placed in a coffin projectile and turned loose in space."

Alvia gave a little gasp, and Nafrin's impersonal eyes turned to her.

"I gather, worker, that you are aware of the nature of a coffin-ship?"

She only gazed dumbly in response, then looked at Jerry.

"You can't escape a coffin-ship," she muttered, gripping his arm. "I've seen one or two workers fired away in them sometimes. Jerry, you . . ."

"I suppose," Jerry interrupted, looking at Nafrin, "that once I am in a coffin-ship I'm fired into space, there to die?"

"Not entirely. We have a sense of justice." Nafrin smiled in his icy way. "In a coffin-ship you are held down by manacles which will only open after a given time. During the period you are held captive a pre-designed atomic motor will guide your coffin-ship to within forty million miles of the sun. Then your machine will no longer be automatically controlled and your manacles will open. You will have the chance of trying to escape . . . but there are two snags," Nafrin added dryly. "One is that within forty million miles of the sun his gravity is so tremendous that you will hardly be able to pull free of it, and the other is that, should you accomplish this feat, and land your machine on some planet—probably Mercury—it cannot be opened. Its locks are on the outside. That means that unless somebody comes to your rescue and releases you — a

very unlikely event — you will die in your machine, either baked or frozen. If from neither of these causes, then from gradual air failure or lack of food and drink. It is death, my friend, carefully planned to inflict the maximum suffering."

As Jerry remained silent, thinking out the murderous efficiency of the "justice" to be meted out there came a sudden interruption. The gigantic Mercutian, who had been listening in silence, suddenly hurled himself in tearing fury upon Nafrin. With his superior size he flung the World Secretary to the floor and closed his lean, deadly fingers about his throat.

Immediately the Martian and Venusian swung round to lend assistance, and Jerry clenched his fists—but the Mercutian's attack was short lived. Several of the Jovian "Earthmen," who were also acting in the capacity of guards, hurtled forward, their weapons drawn. There was a blaze of deadly rays and the Mercutian screamed as death blasted through his back. He relaxed slowly, then his grotesque body was seized and dragged to one side.

Slowly Nafrin got to his feet again, straightening his dishevelled clothes and hair.

"Apparently we shall need one coffin-ship less," he commented. "I might as well add, Earthman, that these representatives of other worlds, who have been in the Interplanetary Council, are as disloyal to the cause as you are. Whilst doing lip-service to the Council they have also done their best to sabotage our conquests on their respective worlds. For that they shall die, as you will. The Mercutian in particular was troublesome. He had been in touch with his own world by space radio, trying to foment an uprising against us . . . that, he can now no longer obtain."

There was a pause, then Nafrin said briefly: "There is no longer any need for delay. You three will enter coffin-ships immediately."

Jerry caught hold of Alvia tightly as her hand gripped his arm.

"What happens to this girl?" he snapped. "I suppose you mean that by returning her to the working ranks she has to go back to Earth?"

"Exactly. But, thinking it over, maybe she can be of more use in the Higher Level than the Lower. I will determine that point later. Certainly she will work hard, and under my direct orders. Nor can she fight back with hypnosis holding her brain night and day."

"You'll not get away with this, Nafrin," Jerry shouted. "You can't fight the people of four planets and hope to win all the time. Hypnosis won't win you the day. You'll . . ."

"Seize him," Nafrin interrupted curtly, motioning the guards. "And these other creatures as well."

The guards acted with devastating promptness. Alvia gave a cry as she found herself whirled aside, and though he put up a fierce resistance Jerry stood no chance. He was finally gripped in such a manner that he could not move his arms. Thuswise he was forced to walk forward, the Venusian and Martian being brought up in the rear. Jerry could hear Alvia shouting desperately after him as he was taken from the enormous laboratory into one every bit as large.

Here there stood four projectiles, each directly under a funnel-like affair which was evidently a shaft contacting the surface. Jerry had enough troubles of his own to contend with to spend time noticing what happened to his fellow prisoners. He himself was lifted and forced into the projectile, held flat on a sprung cradle, and then released as strong metal hoops closed over his waist, chest and ankles. He was so completely pinned he could hardly move. As one of the guards touched a switch a dim light came into being.

Jerry moved his eyes and looked at the small control board and outlook port immediately in front of it. Then the guards retreated and the air-lock slammed shut.

There came a hiss as the air-supply came into being.

Seconds passed. Jerry struggled fiercely and futilely with the manacles, then he paused again as with a soft click levers began to move on the switchboard, evidently automatically controlled. A power plant hummed in the tail of the little projectile — then the machine was hurtling upwards with such dizzying speed Jerry caught his breath. Through the porthole he had a glimpse of metal walls flying past.

Faster and faster still, until the acceleration became so tremendous that he felt his senses slipping. He had completely relapsed into unconsciousness when his machine, and those of the Martian and Venusian, finally plunged out of the green vapours surrounding Jupiter and continued their uninterrupted way into space, fighting against the enormous pull of the giant planet . . .

* * *

The figure which made its way tediously along the rocky defile, pausing ever and again to glance back, was ten feet tall, absurdly thin, and covered entirely in dead-black scales, Nature's provision to protect this man of Mercury upon a world seared by flaming heat on one side and crushed by ageless frost on the other.

Mîrax was the Mercutian's name, and he was a fugitive. He moved with obvious furtiveness, a queer-shaped skull-cap on his big head. As he progressed he was thinking of the underground city from which he had escaped, a city under the heel of an interloper . . . But now it was far behind him, lost over the near-horizon. He had only a stolen space-ship to reach—then freedom and vengeance!

Suddenly he stopped and looked up. Here on the Twilight Belt—the dusk-and-dawn margin created by Mercury's libration-wobble — he was between two hemispheres. Down here, sunshine never reached, but he could see the brilliant white peaks of the daylight half on the one side, and the frozen wilderness which

faced the void on the other. And towards the night side three small space machines were falling helplessly, twirling down and down. They held his attention completely.

It was not the first time he had seen ships crash on to Mercury in this fashion. Many of them, venturing too close to the little planet, found themselves torn from their course by its terrific dragging power.

But, Milrax realised, these three machines were coffin-ships! Death ships, their locks openable only from the outside . . . Milrax watched them vanish behind the barrier range. It seemed that they had not crashed very violently and were evidently under some semblance of control. And anyway the Dark Side was a mass of thick frost and cushioning dust, the latter being pumice deposit blown by the violent, eternal winds raging from the pitiless sunward side.

To the Mercutian, this wild, inhospitable world was a natural habitat, though even he was reluctant to venture into the absolute extremes of the night and day sides. On this occasion, though, there was need of his help. Here were captives, otherwise they would not have come in coffin-ships. As he well knew, none but a Mercutian could survive for long in a space ship on the night side.

He turned from the defile and hurried through the nearest pass in the mountains, emerging finally on the night side. He advanced along a flat, level plain, ankle deep in powdered frost and pumice dust, his scaly body impervious to the cold ranging not far from minus 300 degrees Fahrenheit. He easily inhaled an atmosphere of high oxygen content, yet of such low pressure he might well have been in space itself. They were natural things to him, but death to an alien.

The three coffin ships had fallen fairly close to each other, each of them half buried in the dust. The Mercutian reached the first one in a few minutes, swung its external screws, and tore the air-lock wide open. Evi-

dently the inmate had seen him coming for he emerged in a space-suit, fireproof boots reaching to his thighs, which also served as an adequate protection against the searing cold of the ground.

Milrax judged through the helmet visor that he was an Earthman. He had a strongly cast face, young but weary, tousled black hair, and keen blue eyes. His body, though encased in the suit, was of powerful build. Yes, definitely an Earthman.

The Mercutian gave a nod of greeting and then pointed to the other two vessels. With the Earthman beside him they headed for them and got the locks open, taking care not to remove the inner valves until the outer ones were closed, thereby preserving the precious inner air level.

In the second machine was a big-headed, red-skinned Martian, lying motionless on the floor, obviously from the concussion of his arrival. In the space of a few seconds the Earthman had him in a space-suit and heaved him on to his broad shoulder, no difficult matter against the weak pull of the Mercutian gravity. Switching on his audiophone he spoke in the interplanetary tongue understandable on all worlds of the inner system.

"I'll say one thing, friend, you're lucky to be wandering around free enough to release us, aren't you? I thought all Mercutians had been made captives of hypnosis?"

"They have, unless they be clever enough to escape," Milrax answered ambiguously.

"I walked right into a trap," Jerry said bitterly. "And because of that I got shoved into a coffin ship and my girl-friend was returned to captivity. This Martian here—and the Venusian in the other ship—were fired off at the same time I was. We flew together by automatic control and decided to stay together when the automatic control ceased its influence on our vessels. We decided to land on Mercury here, the only possible

planet, and then work out fresh plans. Since you came along we didn't need to . . . Can't open these ships from the inside, you know."

"I know," the Mercurian conceded gravely; then extending his black, claw-like hand he added: "I'm Milrax."

"Jerry Clyde," Jerry said. "Formerly ruler of the System."

There was a momentary pause as their eyes met. Milrax did not pass any comment. He turned aside.

"You head back to the Twilight Belt with this Martian," he suggested. "I'll get the Venusian and then join you."

Jerry nodded; hitched the Martian more comfortably on his shoulder, then made for the exterior. As he ploughed through the pumice dust his eyes lifted to the eternal auroral display over the mountains of the Twilight Belt—an aurora generated by the sun's electronic floods hurled from only thirty-six million miles away. It was fascinating, awe-inspiring in its grandeur. When he reached the foothills of the Twilight Belt he stood watching it, and waiting.

Then presently the Mercurian appeared — a squat, space-suited figure in his arms. He joined Jerry, and with their respective burdens they made their way amidst the rocks back to the original defile the man of Mercury had been following.

For an hour or so they kept to it, twining in and out, until at last Milrax led the way into a roomy cave inside which was a space machine. He hurried through the air-lock with Jerry behind him. They deposited their burdens gently and, safe now the air-lock was closed, went to work on revival.

Gradually, with the return of air and removal of space-suits, the Martian and Venusian began to recover. The Martian blinked his heavy-lidded eyes once or twice and then sat up. The Venusian, dough-skinned, pasty, like an unfinished model of an Earthman—

except for being only five feet tall—opened huge eyes in wonderment.

Milrax, silent, was doing a little summing-up for himself. He decided that the Earthman was the best physical specimen now he could see him without a space-suit.

"Well, I suppose you want to know the set-up?" Jerry asked. "I was the ruler of Earth, and apparently of Mars, Venus and this planet as well — but I got myself pushed into a coffin-ship when I made plans which didn't suit the powers-that-be. As far as I can make out, the lords of Jupiter have now started a new campaign of oppression, using hypnosis as the weapon, though I can't quite see how they do it."

"They do it very successfully," Milrax said grimly. "Fortunately I got warning by radio from Jupiter by the man who was taken as representative of this planet."

"He died trying to escape," Jerry commented.

The Mercurian nodded slowly. "I thought that would happen. At the moment the four inner planets are held in thrall by hypnosis — though at this distance away from the main will-machine of this world its influence is negligible. The hypnosis is projected from Jupiter and controlled by means of a gem, a special mineral, which amplifies thought waves so that populations fall under its sway. Unless there is insulation, such as I have in this helmet at the moment."

"So that's how you managed to escape!" Jerry exclaimed.

"Yes, thanks to being warned in time as to what was intended. Apparently the Jovians have had this scheme in mind for a long time, only putting it into operation when an emergency arose — which you, Earthman, evidently precipitated."

"Had we three helmets like that we could do plenty!" Jerry mused.

"Perhaps I am a little ahead of you in science," the Mercurian remarked.

"Highly probable," commented the Martian. "The craftsmen of Mercury in their underworld cities are known to be the finest in the System."

The Mercutian smiled at the flattery, then continued: "Agents placed these gems in prearranged places the moment the order went forth. I know the exact arrangement on my own world here, and I assume it will be similar on other planets. In my principal city there is a gigantic machine in the centre of which reposes a jewel made to Jovian specification. It is an enormous thing—a composite mass of crystals woven into one diamond shape and forming the machine's matrix. Through this machine the Jovians can exert their will power across space from their home planet, and these thoughts are vastly amplified on reaching the jewel. They are thereby able to give orders constantly and all in range must obey—unless insulated, of course, as will be those in authority."

"Nice people we're dealing with," Jerry breathed, clenching his fist. "All I want is revenge—to smash up this damnable heirarchy, and also save the girl worker who means more to me than anybody else in the Universe."

"When I got the news of what was coming I resolved to fight back," the Mercutian snapped. "I made arrangements to get this space ship here; I also got near the will-power machine so I could study it at my leisure. I merely pretended to be under its influence: actually this helmet kept my brain clear. I know just how the will-power machine works, and I think we can take it for granted that facsimile machines exist on each of the other inner worlds as well."

"So?" Jerry asked, intently following the Mercutian's observations. Here was a being who was clearly a clever scientist and possessing a devouring hatred for the overlords of Jupiter.

"Some crystals," Milrax said, "absorb light and transmit it with a greater strength than the initial input,

all due to the alchemy of the crystal concerned. Others polarise light, such as your Earth gem known as tourmaline. These crystals used by the Jovians are made up of elements common to every planet in the System and are fused together to finally produce a diamond-like gem which is so poised in its atomic structure as to be sensitive to one particular set of thought-vibrations—those of the Jovians.

"Every race, every animal, every thinking creature, has a different thought-range, just as every musical note has a different vibration. Hence, whilst the Jovians retain the secret of this crystal's exact make-up, sympathetic to their wavelength alone, nobody else can project *their* thoughts to overthrow them. That would demand another crystal with a make-up sympathetic to *our* thoughts."

"So that's it?" Jerry rubbed his chin and frowned. "It makes it an infernally difficult menace to fight. We can't even get near it! To even try would probably mean the downfall of the lot of us."

"It would," the Mercutian agreed, as the Martian and Venusian settled nearby to listen to him. "As long as these Jovians maintain a crystal on each world — a will-power machine — and hurl their own commands from Jupiter, we are helpless, or anyway our respective people are. We know that the Jovian thoughts are projected on carrier waves of the order of light, and being electrical in nature they are re-transmitted. But thought alone is useless over such vast distances. It requires amplification to make it react through the crystals—that is another secret I found out. The actual thought-wave transmitters, on Jupiter that is, are powered by atomic force: at least we could call it that, but actually it is a different kind of power since only one particular mineral can be used to provide the power whereas atomic force proper can be derived from almost any substance . . .

"The mineral the Jovians use is called moxobend, a heavy isotope which they mine from Ceres, the only

asteroid possessing it. This stuff, dissipating its power gradually, is especially suitable for amplifying the peculiar electrical quanta given off by thought waves. Without moxobend," the Mercutian finished, "the Jovians' power of thought amplification would fail—and enslavement would cease. We could probably gain the upper hand then by force of arms."

"We could perhaps stop them getting . . ." the Martian began eagerly, but the Mercutian shook his be-capped head gravely.

"I thought of that, friend, but it cannot be done. Moxobend ingots are mined by the tens of thousands, transported thereafter in freighters to the enslaved planets. We'd die long before we could even hope to defeat such trafficking. But there may be another way. I have discovered the formula, and the material, for a similar gem to that of the Jovians', only it registers and amplifies the thoughts of *Mercutians*, and them alone!"

The others looked at the Mercutian eagerly as he turned to a massive instrument case and pulled forth a reddish jewel. In his scaly hand it glowed like a liquid sunset.

"I said the vital metals were on every world," he proceeded. "That is so because the planets of every sun have the same basic metals as the primary. The secret of the thought transmissions is not in the crystal itself, but in the molecular arrangement. For instance, a wire will give different pitches of sound according to the tension put upon it. So it is with this crystal: the atomic arrangement at once determines the capacity of the crystal to reflect wavelengths."

"But," said the Martian slowly, "could we not get three more jewels and 'gear' them in atomic arrangement to suit our respective worlds?"

"Certainly," Milrax assented. "In fact I had that idea in mind once I have gained the release of my own planet. That, however, is only a small part of the business. We need small machines—projectors—to house the gems; we need plans for the projectors themselves,

and we need moxobend ingots to power them. It will not be easy. On top of that, assuming we make a jewel for each planet, we have then to place it secretly on each planet so it can be reacted upon when needed. Our thoughts will dominate because the Jovians have the lowest thought-vibration in the system. I have proved that much. And a higher vibration, such as we all have, will heterodyne them and thereby make our respective peoples susceptible only to the thoughts of us — each one of us controlling his own world, of course, so as to have the right wavelength. The heterodyning takes place because even in ordinary acoustics the higher note always eliminates the lower in audibility."

"Yes, we've certainly got a job on our hands," Jerry declared. "Ores needed for gems, then moxobend ingots, plans for projectors—I wish to heaven I were a better scientist instead of just an engineer in a very ordinary time—anyway, where do we get the metals to make these gems?"

"This world of mine," the Mercutian answered, with a sweeping movement of his arm. "On the sunward side all the metals we need are there, in the fluid state. That is where I got the material for my jewel. The atomic arrangement comes afterwards—no more difficult than building a radio-television set from a mass of components. The apparatus is here—stuff for which I braved death itself!"

"We have only one course from here on," Jerry said quietly, looking at each of the men in turn. "We must act with common purpose. We all hate the same overlords and we are all intent on saving our respective worlds. Let us form a master plan and carry it out. Tramp these outer planet devils into the dust! Why cannot we become the Union of Four, in place of the Union which has been dissolved? A real Union?"

There was no response, but four hands, each different, met in a firm clasp of friendship.

CHAPTER FIVE

Jerry was the first to move when the little ceremony was over.

"I suggest we take over these three coffin-ships and tow them along with this vessel of yours, Milrax," he suggested. "It will be a simple job in space. All we need are outside fixtures for the locks so that they can be opened from the inside as well."

"Right," the Mercutian assented. "I have fuel and to spare for them. Before we do that, however, we'll get the necessary fluid metals for making three jewels—one for each of you.

He turned to the controls of the machine and sent it sweeping out of the cave, upward to the sun-drenched heights of the Twilight Belt, and so over them to the sunward side of Mercury. Here the Martian and Earthman recoiled into a corner to escape the blinding glare of sunshine. Even the stumpy Venusian, accustomed to the terrific heat of Venus, winced a trifle and backed away.

Milrax, however, remained at the outlook port, his heavy-lidded eyes protected by a natural slightly-tinted film as he gazed down on the yellow pumice plain whirling into storms of vapour under the relentless glare.

Presently he depressed a switch. From the ship's base a device dropped swiftly and drove deep into the fluid ores below. A scoopful of substance was brought up and drawn quickly into a sealed trap. This job done, the Mercurian turned the ship gradually towards the night side again, carefully, to avoid the vast extremes of temperature, his eyes on the thermostats.

Without harm he began to nose down towards the frosty plain where the coffin-ships still lay. Magnetic rays assembled them together, drawing them up until they nestled at secure anchor under the bigger machine's belly. Only then did the Mercurian turn voidwards. When he was well free of Mercury's attraction he released the magnets and the three coffin-ships floated around like satellites round a primary.

"No use wasting juice," Jerry agreed. "One good job done, Milrax. What comes next?"

The Mercurian turned from setting the course. "As we head for Ceres, where we can get the ingots, we will fashion the gems. Each one of you in turn had better give me your mental wavelength. It will be the same for all the members of your respective races. Once I know that I can also make insulated helmets for each of you. Simple contrivances, blocking thought waves as easily as a metal blocks light. I use a radiation-proof alloy."

"Couldn't you have provided helmets for all your race?" the Martian enquired, puzzled.

"Under the conditions, no." Milrax gave a shrug. "But come—your wavelengths, please."

The business which followed consisted of each of them submitting to experiments with a skull-cap bristling with electrodes, the results of which the Mercurian studied on an instrument like a galvanometer. Each in turn the men of different worlds went through the job, and at the end of it, Milrax gave a satisfied nod.

"Good! Now for the helmets."

He had these made to size within an hour. They were rather like aviators' helmets, fitted in the back and crown with his own peculiar insulating metal, thin as paper and pliable as gold. He handed them over solemnly.

"Wear them always," he instructed. "They will do you no harm, and you'll forget you even have them on. Jovian will-power can never affect you as long as you wear them . . . And now for the jewels."

His extraordinary mastery of Mercutian science was again evident in the work which followed. Gathering the cooled metallic elements into a matrix he set to work with alpha rays, breaking up the queer substance and transmuting it, resetting the electronic patterns in their entirety, checking everything on the maze of dials. Finally, from a flaring of metallic shards, there emerged a dull red substance.

Milrax split this into three, graded each one, then withdrew the diamond-shaped jewels from their birthplace. Each one he marked for the planet to which it applied.

"These," he said at length, "are absolutely correct. To test them, however, is not possible for none of us is responsive to the other's thoughts, being of different worlds. Have no fear, though. They are quite in order."

"The difficulty is going to come when we try and put them secretly on our respective planets," Jerry pointed out.

"True. We'll come to that later," the Mercutian decided, and put them away with his own jewel in the instrument case. Then he turned and again settled at the driving panel.

"The ores next?" the Venusian asked.

"Yes, my friend. We need an ore ship plying from Ceres. If that move fails . . . well we will have to try and get some moxobend ingots for ourselves . . ."

Thereupon the journey outwards from Mercury's

orbit began. It was long and tedious since it involved such a vast distance. When it was not his turn to be at the control panel, Jerry spent his time sleeping or dreaming of the hour when he could perhaps see Alvia again and release the enslaved people of Earth from their dominators. Only very rarely now did he think of the extraordinary things which had happened to him. The past which he had left two thousand years behind him was something he could now barely remember. He was just one unit in a scientific quartet bent on destroying the worst menace that had ever threatened free peoples.

Gradually the space machine, with its coffin ships still chained by the bigger vessel's gravity-field, passed the orbits of each inner planet and the goal began to loom ahead beyond the scattered danger region of the asteroids. Here the Mercutian took control again, the destination Ceres.

"Thinking it over," Milrax said, after long reflection. "it would perhaps be better to make Io our base. That little Jovian moon is totally airless and deserted, but riddled with many useful caverns from which we can watch whatever traffic goes to and from Ceres—or from Ceres to Jupiter. Also, Io is the ideal place to store the ingots once we've seized them."

"Once we do," Jerry acknowledged dryly. "Seems to me we're going to have some pretty stiff resistance."

The Mercutian turned the ship towards the moons of mighty Jove before he answered.

"There will certainly be resistance, Earthman — but this ship is prepared for it. I built it up over a long period in the matter of furnishing it with protection. You will see what it can do when action is called for."

With this promise Milrax speeded the vessel through the void until the Jovian moons came nearer. Then he turned the machine, speeding it down towards the arid, friendless surface of Io bathed in the light of the primary.

With superb skill he brought the vessel skimming to within a hundred feet or so of a coal-black plain, worked quickly with the underjets, keeping a keen look out below until at last his superhuman eyesight caught a glimpse of something.

Jerry, the Martian and the Venusian, unattuned to utter night, could only see blank rock. They waited tensely as the Mercutian piloted the vessel down. Finally he snapped an anchor-switch. Promptly, the three coffin-ships outside clamped to the roof of the vessel and stopped there. Only then did Milrax dive down and sweep into the mouth of a gigantic cave. The vessel halted in pitch darkness, Jupiter and the remainder of the moons visible through the rear port—and far to the left the asteroids loomed, together with Ceres.

"Nice going," Jerry murmured in admiration. "And this seems to be a perfect spot to see from—and not be seen."

"I suppose you know, Milrax, what the ore ships look like?" the Venusian asked. "All freighters look the same to me."

"But not these," the Mercutian answered. "I have seen them come to my world with new moxobend for the will-machine. They are yellow machines with blunt noses . . . There is one!" he broke off sharply, pointing upwards with a scaly hand.

Somehow it came as something of a relief to see a solitary machine, a massive golden-coloured freighter, plying its lonely way out from Ceres. Nor was it heading towards Jupiter but out into the void, evidently bound for one of the inner planets with its cargo of ingots to maintain enslavement.

Jerry's eyes narrowed as he watched it. "What are we waiting for?" he demanded. "Let's get after it!"

But the unemotional Mercutian was not to be hurried. He watched the freighter until it was well away from the asteroid region and in free space: only then did his

claws snap the switches. The ship hurtled out of the cave and up into the void in a curving arc — then it began to pursue the freighter at a demoniacal speed.

Jerry, the Martian and the Venusian watched keenly, wondering what plan the Mercurian had devised. They found out soon enough. Still moving at terrific velocity — so fast indeed that the ray-guns of the freighter had no time to get focussed—Milrax drove his vessel right under the belly of the freighter. Then he closed a power-contact. Immediately the Mercurian ship went upwards vertically, pressing the occupants hard to the floor. Finally, magnetism anchored it to the freighter as tightly as a barnacle to a ship.

"Where does this get us?" Jerry asked curiously.

"You will see, Earthman. We are safe from their weapons at this angle — but because we are in contact they are not safe from *this*!"

With a merciless glint in his eyes the Mercurian became busy with his control panel again. Dynamos began to hum as he watched an output meter intently. Jerry looked too and then gave a start.

"Hell's bells, a hundred thousand volts!" he ejaculated. "What do you want that high tension circuit for? Anyway, where is all the juice coming from — and going to?"

"The storage of solar potential is a scientific art known to us of Mercury," Milrax replied. "Perhaps because we are so near to the sun we have given it more attention than the scientists of other worlds. The energy can be stored. I stole two cylinders before I left my world, and at the moment the current is dispersing throughout the length and breadth of the freighter—flowing through the metallic floors, walls and superstructure. We feel nothing because of effective insulation . . . But those Jovian devils are being destroyed!"

Jerry tightened his lips and glanced at the set faces of the Martian and Venusian. There was something about this man of Mercury which was inhumanly

efficient—something inexorable about the way in which he set about the electrocution of his enemies . . . Then presently he cut off the power and began to clamber into a space-suit.

"Wait for my signal," he ordered; then he climbed through the roof-lock which brought him out immediately under the base of the freighter. He spent some time arranging his life-line, then, clinging to projections on the big vessel he shot himself upwards to the main air-lock.

Watching from the ports the trio left behind saw the flare of sparks as the Mercutian went to work with a blasting gun to smash the air-lock screws. It was a long job eating through the space-hardened metal, but at last he succeeded and passed inside. After a while he reappeared and waved a bloated arm in a signal.

Immediately Jerry got the remaining space-suits, and with the Martian and Venusian beside him he followed the Mercutian's example and climbed up into the freighter. Presently all four had come into the control room, taking care to keep their suits on as the Mercutian nodded to the air-testing gauge. It registered a 75 per cent content of ammoniated hydrogen gas.

Jerry nodded understandingly inside his helmet. The men of Jove were, of course, ammonia breathers. But they were certainly as susceptible to electrocution as anybody else.

At the moment they stood or sat in various parts of the big control room. They were queer beings—thick-legged, low-built, massive-headed, covered in their scaly, crocodile-like armour, of immense resiliency to withstand the pressures and tempests of their ammoniated planet.

Jerry turned from surveying their dead postures as the Mercutian hurried through into the immense storage room. He went after him, the Venusian and Martian coming up in the rear. All four of them gazed in satis-

faction upon holds stacked to the curved metal roofs with deep brown, glittering ingots.

"Moxobend! There we have it!" Milrax glanced about him quickly. "The fuel for will-projectors. Here's one lot which is never going to reach its destination, anyway."

"You mean to take it to Io?" the Venusian questioned.

"Not only it, my friend, but this entire vessel." The Mercurian became active again. "I'll take charge of this machine. You others take the other ship back to Io behind me."

They nodded and left him, Jerry taking on the job of controlling the Mercurian machine. Obeying radio orders, he kept in the void, whilst Milrax manoeuvred the clumsy freighter down into the cave. It proved to be a two-hour job, but it finally left the ship well hidden from any possible searches in space. Only then did Jerry lower his machine to the plain at the mouth of the cave. Milrax came in, unscrewing his helmet.

"That vessel will stay there until that glorious day when we need its ingots," he announced. "Our next moves must be devoted to the planting of our mineral jewels on our respective worlds. I think, Earthman, that your world should come first since you have so much at stake. Have you made any plans for hiding a jewel and escaping again safely?"

Jerry reflected for a moment and then nodded. "I have worked out a scheme, yes—the only possible one despite the risk. I understand, from information I got when ruler, that there is a Radio Dessemination Asteroid somewhere in space?"

"Yes," Milrax agreed. "A synthetic asteroid between the Earth and Moon. What of it?"

"According to what I've heard there is a lone Earth man there who acts as a radio operator," Jerry went on. "He is as much a prisoner as any Earth worker because, stranded on his lonely spatial light-house, he

cannot do any damage to anybody. His job is to radio cosmic reports — concerning drifts and dangerous meteoric swarms, and so on — to Earth, for the use of space navigators . . . now, if I were to get to the Station and capture him I could send a radio message to Earth telling them of a breakdown. They would send an engineer. I could overpower him, take his place and number, and so get back to Earth. By that means I'd get the run of the radio department—about the best place to conceal the jewel."

"A long chance, my friend," the Mercutian said, musing. "And you would be recognised as the former leader of the world. Your only safe course would be to exactly resemble the engineer who comes from Earth."

"Disguise, you mean?" Jerry shrugged. "I'm afraid there is nothing I can do about that."

"On the contrary." Milrax gave a slight smile and turned to one of the cupboards inset into the wall. He produced a sealed container and handed it over.

"For me?" Jerry asked in surprise.

"Yes. In it is a plastic substance. When you have incapacitated the man you intend to duplicate, spread this paste over his face. It will take an exact impression of his features after the fashion of a death mask—but with one difference. When you fit the mask into place the natural warmth of your body will give the paste resilience. You will be able to move the lips, the eyelids and so forth. It will stretch far enough for you to carry it over your head in the form of a life-like hood."

"Sounds good," Jerry said. Any other tricks I should know?"

The Mercutian shrugged. "You have made your plan, Earthman, so proceed with it. You might take this, also."

From the cupboard once again he handed an object like a wrist-watch and strapped it on Jerry's wrist.

"A frequency-detector," Milrax explained. "If you should get into difficulties and do not return in a reasonable time it may enable us to find you. We shall remain here on lo, safe from prying eyes whilst you work out your plan. Our next job then is to fix an arrangement on the coffin ship so you can open the lock from the inside."

This was not a difficult task and was completed within an hour. Then the Mercutian handed over the Earth gem. Jerry put it carefully away in his kit and began to climb into his heavy space-suit.

"Everything depends on you now, Earthman," Milrax told him seriously. "It is part of our compact that each must deal with his own world's problem. You have a ship, a jewel, plenty of fuel, and all necessities . . . and you have our good wishes."

Jerry smiled and gripped the hands held out to him.

* * *

Small and fast, but cramped, the coffin-ship was nevertheless the kind of manipulative machine which Jerry wanted. In a few minutes he was tearing away into space, watching the black hulk of lo dropping from him below. He imagined his colleagues watching him out of sight.

Finally he turned the vessel Earthwards and travelled with all the acceleration he could muster. He was in for a long hop, and knew it. He conserved his strength as best he could by long intervals of sleep interspersed with refresher tablets ever and again . . .

And so finally out of the endless void there began to loom the solitary synthetic asteroid floating between the gravity fields of Earth and Moon. Upon it was probably the loneliest Earthman in the System. Jerry had read of him in the records but at that time had never expected to meet him.

His eyes gleamed with excitement as he saw the single lighted dome of the radio station perched on a

pinnacle of rock. It was like a lighthouse of the void, and a perfect guide for him. Swinging up from the asteroid's underside to escape detection he finally brought his vessel down within a mile of the centre of the eminence on which the station stood.

Space-suited, gun in hand, Jerry clambered over the hard rocks, reaching the mighty sealed door of the place some ten minutes later. That he could never get through it was obvious at a glance, so he headed round to the rear and looked for the one vulnerable spot present in all space outposts—the air-shaft through which spent atmosphere was expelled. For a second or so, by mechanical means, these huge vents opened wide and then closed again. But in the split seconds he could slide right through into the control room.

This in mind he scouted for the trap, finally found it on the roof, opening and shutting like the gills of a fish. He scaled the emergency ladder quickly, waited for the contrivance to open—then the instant it did so he hurled himself headlong into it.

As he had expected he dropped down a dark chute and landed with a sudden hard bump at the bottom of a kind of flue. In a moment he turned, levelling his gun at the solitary radio operator surrounded by his instruments.

The man stared in amazement as Jerry got to his feet, but he kept his hands up.

"What's the idea?" the operator asked quietly. "Do Earthmen kill Earthmen? Or are you a stinking Jovian in the guise of an Earthman?"

Jerry unscrewed and then removed his helmet. He gave a brief grin.

"I'm no stinking Jovian," he said.

"Why, you're . . ." The man stared fixedly. "You're Jeremy Clyde, the Traveller! The ruler!"

"Right. Sorry about the gun. I thought you might try and get tough — but apparently you are not under Jovian will-power on this lonely station?"

"True enough." The man gave a grim smile. "I'm master of my own will, but what good is it? I have my orders to obey and I can't escape from here . . . and what brings you here, anyway? Last I heard of you through secret radio reports you had been deposed and fired into space in a coffin-ship—to die."

"Yes; but I didn't die." Jerry gave a hard smile. "Instead I became the Earth representative of a new Union of Four, who have the avowed aim of smashing Jovian domination. If you will co-operate, all the better. If not, I'll make you. That's how things are."

"Do you think I'd stand in the way of your helping Earth?" the man demanded passionately. "I'll do anything you want! Anything!"

"Okay then. Radio to Earth and tell them that this station has broken down somewhere; you'll know a likely spot to make it convincing. Say you need a radio engineer immediately."

"But—but why? What's the idea?"

"You'll find out," Jerry said.

The man puzzled it out for a moment, then reaching no conclusion he turned to the microphone and contacted Earth. At the end of his technical description of a breakdown, the Earth voice, dull and heavy, responded.

"Very well, an engineer will leave immediately."

Jerry nodded in satisfaction.

"Ten to one it will be a Jovian looking like an Earthman," the operator said. "The will-machine won't reach out this far and the powers-that-be would never trust an Earthman with that much liberty."

"If it is a Jovian, all the better," Jerry responded, and briefly outlined his scheme.

"But it's crazy!" the operator cried, aghast. "Once you get to Earth the will-power machine will overwhelm you."

Jerry grinned. "Not whilst I'm wearing this

helmet . . ." and he tapped it as it lay on the top of his skull, secured round the back of his head. "And with the kind of disguise I'll have nobody will know the difference. If the engineer *is* a Jovian no questions will be asked about his helmet. A Jovian has the freedom to do exactly as he likes."

"It's certainly a risk *I* wouldn't like to take," the operator muttered. "If you are found, Nafrin, who is now ruling Earth, will have you exterminated on the spot."

"I don't doubt it. Nafrin and I never did hit it off very well together. And I know the whole project bristles with difficulties . . . But a day of liberation has to come, and I'm going to do all I can to hasten it. Incidentally, since you are in charge of radio reports you may know something about a worker I have to find. Her name is Alvia Menron. Happen to have any news of her?"

"I never heard of the name."

"How about Worker 126? Does that convey anything?"

The operator pondered for a moment, then a thought seeming to strike him he got to his feet and went across to a huge filing cabinet. After a search through the index he produced a metal card with electrical transcription upon it. He turned to look at Jerry as he stood waiting anxiously.

"Yes, I have some news of her, but I don't know how important it is," he said. "She was made personal secretary to Nafrin some little time ago."

Jerry gazed in amazement. "She—she was *what*?"

"That's what the record says." The operator gave a shrug. "I have a transcription of all messages relayed from Earth as news. The record says, briefly, that Worker 126 has, at the instruction of Nafrin, Master of the Upper Level, been promoted to the post of his private secretary."

Jerry reflected. "Mmmm—so that's it. Natrin did say he would keep an eye on her, and that's evidently how he's done it. At least it should make her more or less safe—for the time being. But it will make it doubly difficult for me to contact her."

The operator closed the file, then there was silence for a moment. Presently he said:

"I imagine you could do with a meal—and I know I could. I'll go and fix it."

He did so, and during the meal Jerry made it his opportunity to relax. He spent the time talking to the radio operator and learning all he could — and in the main it seemed to be a tale of woe, with the stamp of Jovian dominance upon everything. In fact, the more he heard the more Jerry realised the complexity of the struggle ahead if the interlopers were ever to be rooted out.

Then, three hours later, Jerry caught a glimpse through the outlook dome of a silvery vessel speeding down quickly towards the asteroid.

"Hope he doesn't notice my own coffin-ship," Jerry murmured, as the radio operator gazed with him. "I put it down in a gully to keep it out of sight."

He took out his gun and moved to the main air-lock of the station. Evidently the man from Earth had not noticed the coffin-ship, otherwise he would have investigated. Instead there came a buzz on the instrument panel as the button outside the main door was depressed.

"Okay," Jerry murmured. "Let him in."

The radio operator pressed the release-switch. An apparent Earthman with a space-suit tossed over his arm came in, still breathing heavily from his few moments in the decompression chamber between the locks.

"What the . . . ?" He started and swung as Jerry's gun jabbed him in the ribs.

"Shut up and keep walking," Jerry instructed.

The man obeyed, moved to a chair, and then sat down. He looked at Jerry in bewilderment.

"You're—the Traveller!" he said.

"Right first time. And you are a Jovian, in a synthetic Earth body?"

"Yes, but I . . ."

Jerry fired, without passion. The deadly pencil of flame went clean through the engineer's body, killing him instantly. His head and shoulders slumped forward, then he sprawled face down on the floor.

"I'm afraid I haven't much regard for the Jovian race," Jerry said briefly, putting his gun back in his belt.

"Now let's see who this blighter's supposed to be."

He turned the body over and went quickly through the pockets, finally extracting an identification tag. It said:

Sidney Calthorp, Engineer 70, Central Radio Branch.

"Everything about him Earthly except his blasted heart," Jerry growled.

He went to work to take off the man's overalls, which he donned himself. Then he spent a few moments threading over the hole where the ray gun had pierced. This done he pocketed the identity card and turned to his kit. Opening the can of synthetic plastic he poured it over the man's dead face and in a matter of seconds a rubbery mask had formed, complete in every detail from creases to hollows.

"Very nice," the operator complimented, watching.

Jerry peeled off the mask and pulled it in position over his own face, using the loose circle at the back to hold it in position. By the time he had finished arranging the disguise, it fitted so perfectly, and moved so naturally as his facial muscles worked that it was practically impossible to tell it was a disguise.

"So I become Sidney Calthorp, Engineer 70, of the Central Radio Branch," Jerry said. "That being done I'm on my way, and I hope to see you again some day when Earth is liberated."

He shook the radio operator's hand warmly and then got into his space-suit and helmet. Picking up his kit he hurried outside. Leaving the coffin-ship where it was he used the engineer's far better machine: in fact he had to. He could not possibly return to Earth in a machine different from the one in which he had left. It should also give him untroubled entry on his return.

Soon he was back in space, streaking Earthwards, watching the green ball turn into a globe — then to a vast, cloud-covered landscape. Once under the clouds he sped westwards in the morning sunlight, heading for the mighty controlling city where he had been such a short-lived ruler . . .

Presently he began to descend towards the space-airport and landed safely. As he alighted from his vessel, guards — Jovians in Earth bodies, he judged— looked at him fixedly. He kept his nerve and casually took his kit in one hand. His identity tag did the rest. His kit was assumed to belong to his profession. He was allowed to leave the space-airport without any awkward questions being asked and, tense within himself, he walked to the Lower Levels and found his way to the giant Central Radio Station, a place conspicuous enough by reason of its dozens of antennae and aerials.

On the way he passed many men and women workers, his own people — dull, apathetic, looking neither right nor left, their wills utterly subjugated by a power which he himself could not detect thanks to his protective helmet. To him, the whole thing was ghastly. It made him more furious than ever to see every man and woman of his race chained by wills millions of miles distant.

At length, grim-faced, he entered the radio centre, walking unhesitatingly through the various departments to the central plant. Here and there he was stopped by an official, but his identity tag and bag of equipment was again taken at its face value. His helmet he explained away as being a protection against dangerous radiations in the job he had been sent to do. With

bare-faced impudence he asserted that he had been ordered to trace a serious flaw in the station's transmission output.

So he progressed, knowing his way fairly well from the study of the place which he had made with television when he had been ruler; until presently he came to an area where countless experts worked mechanically at their posts. Over each post was a number and a name. Every engineer was docketed, fixed into a master-plan of Jovian design, and each engineer was a Jovian at root.

So Jerry finally reached a vacant section marked "70." He sat in the solitary chair and noted the name "Sidney Calthorp" over the number. So far, so good. He began to study the technical instruments before him, not understanding them in the least, but looking highly efficient just the same.

As he worked his eyes darted quickly about him for a likely place to hide his jewel. He sat for nearly half-an-hour trying to figure a position; then at last his gaze strayed to the meshed network of output wires from all the transmission boards, wires which led upwards to a massive insulator in the metal ceiling. That insulator, he realised, was the underside of the giant transmitting beacon on the building roof—two hundred feet of it in a tapering metal obelisk. The roof meant he would have to go to the Upper Level, and there he might work out a way of finding Alvia.

Leading to the Upper Level there were elevators—as he well knew — self operated. At the top of the metal obelisk—as again he also knew—was a masterpiece of robot apparatus by which the various wavelengths were sorted out and dissected from the mass-production jumble of messages sent from below. So, if the jewel were hidden in that robot apparatus it had not one chance in a million of being disturbed. Further, the sensitive walls of the mechanism's casing would render thought waves more able to penetrate . . .

Jerry's line of thought finished here. He got up and walked out to the roof elevator. Nobody looked after him. He was simply an engineer on a job, as far as they knew.

Jerry operated the elevator for himself and when he reached the roof at the lofty Upper Level he found it deserted. It was quite the tallest roof in the city too, higher even than that of his former controlling building which he could see not very far distant. He gave a glance around him and then hurried to the metal obelisk and swiftly scaled the supports in one of its sides. To move away the slide of the casing was but the work of a moment.

Carefully he removed his jewel and lowered it gently into the base of the complicated mechanism, taking care not to disturb any of the sensitive components and so give himself away. To his satisfaction his own gem lay in a bed of other jewels, essential to the working of the apparatus. Definitely he had found the perfect hiding place.

Smiling to himself he slid the casing back into position and then began to descend. He had reached the roof when, to his surprise, something jabbed him sharply in the back. He turned swiftly, startled.

"Put up your hands!"

Slowly he complied and found himself looking at a slim girl in the attire of an aviatrix. Nearby on the roof was a glider which explained why she had made no sound upon her arrival.

The girl had big grey eyes and hair which flowed in blonde waves.

"Alvia!" Jerry gasped, astounded.

CHAPTER SIX

"Keep your hands up," Alvia ordered, as he half-lowered them. "What were you doing up on the beacon? Who are you, anyway?"

Jerry did not answer for a moment. He was gazing at her completely blank expression. Her face might have been dead for all the individuality she showed.

"I'm Jerry," he said quietly, and pulled off his mask for her to see his own features. "Surely you *must* recognise me?"

"I am the personal secretary to His Excellency, Nafrin," the girl said, talking like a gramophone record. "I was on my way back to headquarters when I caught sight of you doing something to that beacon. What were you doing?"

"That's my business," Jerry retorted. "Look here, Alvia, you're utterly submerged by a will-machine which makes you just obey orders and perform acts which will help the overlords, otherwise you wouldn't have bothered to find out what I was doing . . ."

"Start walking," the girl interrupted. "Nafrin will wish to question you."

Jerry looked about him desperately. Once off this roof and his whole plan—in fact the plan of the entire

Union of Four—would be in jeopardy. He looked at Alvia's weapon: no use trying anything with that. In her mentally controlled condition she would fire ruthlessly, a thing she would never have contemplated in her normal state of mind. Attack her? No; there was still the gun to reckon with.

"Move!" the girl commanded, as he still tried to make up his mind.

Helplessly he obeyed, moving along slowly towards the roof elevator—then at a sudden new sound creeping into the rumble of the city he paused and listened. There was something familiar about the noise — the deep bass roaring of powerful rockets.

Alvia glanced up too in curiosity, and Jerry immediately seized his chance. His hand whipped the gun out of her grasp and he sent her reeling backwards. Stumbling on the backs of her heels she sprawled full-length and glared up at him.

"Well, go on—shoot!" she invited contemptuously.

Jerry shook his head fiercely and stared upwards. Something was coming from the heights amidst a flare of sparks. Within a few minutes his wildest expectations were confirmed. It was the Mercutian's spaceship, coming straight for him.

At that moment he had not the time to ponder the why or wherefore. He began to signal frantically with both hands — but since he had evidently been seen it was unnecessary effort. A green attractor-ray stabbed from the ship's base towards him. He raced for it, just as the girl jumped to her feet and snatched her gun from where Jerry had dropped it. Immediately she had it levelled again.

Jerry stopped, then ducked just in time as the charge flashed over his head in sizzling fury. He charged for the girl and pinned her arms to her sides, clutching her slender body to him tightly. At the same instant the attractor-ray enveloped them, bearing them right off the roof over the heights of the city.

The girl closed her eyes tightly, struggling a little. Jerry continued to hold her in a fierce grip, smiling down on her. Slowly the ray began to shorten and withdrew the pair into the open lock in the base of the machine. In a moment or two they were in the control room.

Milrax, the Venusian and the Martian stared in surprise as the girl gave herself a little shake and then looked around her with a bitter glance.

"Who is this?" Milrax asked coldly.

"You will find out quickly enough when my abduction is discovered!" the girl told him venomously. "I am the personal secretary of Nafrin! Do you realise what you've done?" she demanded, stamping her foot.

The Mercutian glanced at Jerry. "An interesting captive, my friend . . ."

"More than that to me," Jerry broke in. "This is Alvia, the girl I was looking for. By a stroke of luck she caught me in the middle of my activities."

"Did your mission succeed?" the Mercutian asked anxiously.

Jerry nodded. "It did. But I don't quite understand how you managed to come along so opportunely to rescue me from Alvia's gun."

"Simple enough," said the Martian, nearby. "When you had left us we discovered what we took to be a dangerous meteorite emanating radiations quite close to Earth's orbit. So we decided to examine it . . ."

"We did so, and it proved harmless," Milrax added. "Just a mass of stray matter between Earth and lunar orbits — and stationary. Radioactive: nothing more. Being so near Earth we thought we might see if your mission was anywhere near completed. It was your wrist frequency-detector which showed us your position."

Jerry glanced down at his wrist and grinned. For the time being he had completely forgotten the instrument. Then his eyes strayed to the girl.

It was curious to note how, as the ship hurtled away into the void, the influence of Earth began to desert the girl. Her iron-hard expression commenced to relax. She looked oddly like a child awakened from a deep sleep.

"Just what has been . . ." She broke off and stared at Jerry fixedly, then her arms went about his neck tightly. "Jerry! It's you! And—and I thought . . ."

She relaxed again, colouring a little. "I suppose I ought not to have done that?" she asked, embarrassed. "It was just the effect of seeing you again when I'd believed you dead . . ."

Jerry drew her back to him and kissed her gently.

"No use pretending, Alvia," he said, and gave a serious smile. "We've been in love with each other ever since the first moment we met."

"What—what's happened?" she asked in wonder, looking at the control room and then the men of the other worlds. "The last thing I recall is being taken back to Earth after you had been fired into space. Everything else is blank."

It was the Mercutian who explained the situation, in his precise, matter-of-fact fashion. When he had finished Alvia turned her gaze to Jerry.

"Then in the interval of time I've been completely hypnotised? Following out Nafrin's orders as his secretary?"

"You've been as hypnotised as everybody else on the four inner planets," Jerry acknowledged grimly. "I was not affected on my return because of this insulated helmet and disguise of my features left me unmolested. We can—and will—fashion a helmet for you. I take it for granted that you are willing to join the struggle for liberation?"

"What a question!" Alvia cried. "I'm willing to do anything you suggest."

"Even risk your life?" asked the Mercutian, studying her.

Jerry gave him a sharp look. "If there's any risk of

life to be done on Earth. Milrax, I'll do it," he said. "I'm not taking the chance of losing Alvia again."

"The plan I have in mind is one which only she can carry out," the Mercurian replied, then turning to Alvia he added: "The thing we shall need most when the attack on these Jovians is finally launched is space-ships—a huge fleet of heavily-armoured ones. That is one of our biggest problems. You, Earthwoman, can help to provide them."

"I can?" Alvia looked amazed. "But how?"

"I am thinking," Milrax continued, "of that harmless meteorite which is shedding radioactive emanations towards Earth. Can you not radio to Nafrin from here and tell him that you believe danger to Earth to be imminent from this object? Can you tell him that an exodus from Earth is imperative in the near future? Space-ships, armoured for tackling the dangers of other worlds, will have to be built for the exodus, but used for another reason when we are ready."

Alvia looked doubtful. "But how do I explain to Nafrin that I am in space? Don't forget the Jovians don't allow any space trips unless they be at their command—just in case we get too far out of their influence, as we are at the moment."

"You can tell Nafrin that you felt impelled to examine this radioactive meteorite: he will imagine that the will-machine commanded you to do it, controlled as it is by powers millions of miles away. He, in turn, will of course be compelled to ask for Jovian permission to build space-ships. I fancy that from their distance away in the void the Jovians will decide the meteorite looks dangerous, though in actual fact it is not. Further, Earthwoman, do not forget that you are still supposed to be under Jovian influence and therefore incapable of treachery. Nobody except us knows how far away you are from Earth's influence."

"All right, I'll do it," Alvia said, with a quick nod.

Immediately the Mercurian turned on the radio and

made contact with the distant Earth. The coldly mechanical voice of Nafrin finally came through and Alvia went quickly into the "act" designed for her.

"Your information is most disturbing," Nafrin commented, when she had come to the end of her explanation.

"But true, Excellence," she insisted, using the flat voice of one hypnotised. "I know, because I am so close to it. I will soon be overwhelmed. This is my last act, Excellence," she continued. "I am about to die. Earth people *must* be got away from their planet. Space-ships by the thousand, fully armed to do battle with other worlds, must be constructed."

"Why the 'I am about to die' business?" Jerry whispered.

"So I shan't have to return to Earth," she murmured. "I will be written off and can stay with you, believed dead."

"Wait whilst I contact my superiors," Nafrin's voice ordered, from the speaker.

The interval took thirty minutes, during which time the group in the ship waited tensely. Then Nafrin spoke again.

"My superiors are inclined to agree with you that there are dangerous emanations near Earth. They thank you for your service and have given me orders to have space machines constructed. When they are ready general evacuation will begin, probably to one of the outer planets."

Nafrin switched off, quite unconcerned that his personal secretary was, as far as he knew, dying from radiation in the depths of space. She had merely been a unit, and could be replaced.

Jerry rubbed his hands. "Nice going, Alvia! Seems we managed to fool them completely, eh, Milrax?"

"Quite a successful plan," the Mercutian agreed. "In fact, we might call the Earth part of the scene all but complete. Next we come to the other worlds . . . Our

most difficult task at the moment is to have an exact design of a will-projector such as these Jovians have installed on the four worlds. On my own world I never had the chance for a detailed study of the power-plant; but we have got to have a full design, inside and out, from which to fashion our own projectors for liberation. So, I await suggestions."

"I think I have one," said the Martian slowly. "On my world the surface, as you are aware, is deserted because of lack of proper atmospheric conditions. What cities there are are underground. The Jovians have made use of my planet's deserted surface and planted their will-machine in the desert sands under a transparent protective dome, knowing it would never be visited by Martians because their wills would be subjected . . ."

"You mean," the Mercutian interrupted, "that the power plant stands in a solitary state on the surface of your world?"

"Exactly. With an ultra-rapid, ten-millionth of a second camera—or rather two cameras—such as you have here, one of them X-ray, I believe I could accomplish two things. I could photograph the will-power machine inside and outside and at the same time drop my own gem."

"Which would be found!" Jerry objected. "Besides, to have the right effect it ought to be underground."

"It will be," the Martian answered, then, as he saw the puzzled looks he continued: "I have not been idle, my friends, and we have certain sciences on our planet just as other have on theirs. Intra-atomic physics is one of our most advanced sciences. Let me show you what I have had time to devise."

He turned to the instrument board and with the various types of apparatus began to work swiftly. The others watched him, puzzling as to what he was about. First he made a slender casing with the welders — it

looked rather like a bomb—and then he busied himself with the construction of a delicate apparatus resembling an electric watch. Finally, the object which emerged was an egg-shaped container lined with plush and firmly fixed to the clock-like device which in itself possessed a small and oddly designed battery.

Even the Mercutian, clever craftsman though he was, was baffled. He raised questioning eyes.

"A self-sinking bomb," the Martian explained proudly. "It can sink through the ground, or solids, as a stone sinks through water. On my own planet these things are genuine bombs used for blasting at great depths. This is just a case, built on the same design, and not containing explosive."

The others nodded.

"Solids," the Martian continued, "are composed of atoms, and atoms are miniature solar systems. If you imagine them from a sideways angle, they are *flat*. But this flatness points in all directions. It is not organised. Because of this no solid can fall through another. Atoms, though, have poles, but they point in *all* directions. I have here devised a magnetism to make them all point in one direction. That is the purpose of the magnetic motor. So this shell, this case, has all its atoms flat—parallel—and therefore they only present about fifteen per cent. resistance to the matter around them. Drawn by common gravity, the shell sinks through the ground, stopping only when the automatic switches give it normalcy again. Naturally, the ground itself remains undisturbed—and there is no hole to show where the bomb-case has fallen."

"This is about one of the cleverest things I have heard of," Jerry declared in admiration. "What wouldn't some of my contemporaries have done with an idea like that in my day!"

"Yes, quite ingenious," the Mercutian agreed, and he

sounded slightly jealous. "What other details are there?"

"The distance between the surface of Mars and the underworld of my enslaved fellows is about two miles," the Martian continued. "So, by letting this shell—having the jewel inside it—sink about a mile and there stopping it by automatic means, I can be sure of its absolute safety, hidden until we are ready to use it. And its position will be known to us because it will be exactly under the Jovian will-power plant. Needless to add, the will-power vibrations go through anything solid and re-desseminate the same way."

"Good work, my friend," Milrax acknowledged. "But, tell me, how do you propose to defeat the dome which houses this will-power machine of the Jovians?"

"I shan't need to defeat it. Using a space-ship I can fly to within a few feet of it at lightning speed to avoid the constant barrier of ray and flame guns which protect it. I shall drop this device, which will pass through the dome, and then through the floor itself, before they can grasp what has happened. Simultaneously I will photograph the plant with ordinary and X-ray cameras. I think I can guarantee absolute success."

The Martian took the particular gem Milrax handed to him and put it in the self-sinking container.

"Magnetic vibration holds the jewel in place and so prevents it escaping from the shell," he explained. "And now" — he looked through the port — "I had better prepare."

He turned, scrambled into his space-suit, and then left the control room. For the next half-hour he was busy loading up his own coffin-ship, still fastened by magnets to the Mercutian machine. By the time he was finished the huge disc of Mars with its deserts and criss-crossed lines was looming near.

The Martian returned to the controls and studied his world intently.

"There it is, and here I go," he said finally. "I fancy that the Union of Four will not find its Martian member lacking in courage."

He turned, shook hands all round, then went back through the trap. The others gathered around the ports to watch events.

The Martian knew full well as he clambered into his narrow control room and lay flat that he was going to make a death dive. Better than the others he had reason to know the capabilities of the defensive weapons surrounding the will-power machine on his planet.

For all that he did not hesitate for a moment. He arranged his jewel-shell and the cameras over the floor-traps, then eased in the power switches. Instantly he hurtled free from the big vessel, turned, got that solitary building like a gleaming eye in the near-centre of Mars, and then began to hurtle towards it with ever increasing speed.

Like a literal bolt from the blue he screamed along, faster and faster, his face frozen with strain, eyes unblinking through the guiding-sights, hands on the switches. The solitary, glittering speck of the dome whizzed up to meet him.

The ship jerked very briefly as it contacted the thin air of the planet. Still the Martian went down in the fastest power-dive ever, giving the ship all the acceleration it had got.

Then within a few miles of the solitary outpost the defence screens started up. Some of them the Martian saw—heat-beams and such—but others he did not. Just the same he knew they were waiting to snare him, disrupt him. He gave a grim smile. Even the best of screens needed a certain time to achieve full efficiency, and at his present demoniacal velocity he reckoned he would flash clean through and be gone before he could be disintegrated.

Faster—faster still! The blood pounded fiercely in

his body with the smashing momentum. Nearet rocked that solitary point. He was over it!

He closed the switches to the split-second and dropped the self-sinking shell. Simultaneously the ultra-rapid cameras flashed and clicked, operating with their telescopic lenses. He had time to see his "bomb" drop and vanish through the glassy dome — then the point was behind him and he was rocking and swaying through a stormy sea of vibration, criss-crossed beams of destruction, and bursting atomic shells.

The ship's plates glowed hotly. One twanged as it tried to part from its rivets . . . Then the Martian was free again, flashing upwards in a blaze of sparks, higher and higher, out of the thinning atmosphere into the clear remoteness of space.

Slowly he began to retrace his way to the waiting Mercurian vessel. He arrived, and anchored. Smiling, he came back into the control room with the cameras in each hand.

"Great!" Jerry greeted him. "That was the fastest thing I ever saw! Did you drop the gem okay?"

The Martian nodded. "They would never see it; and even if they did it would have sunk out of sight before they could do anything about it . . . Just the same, we'd better be moving on before they dispatch spaceships in pursuit."

"We are already on our way," Milrax said calmly. "Let me have the cameras."

He took them and went into the adjoining laboratory. In ten minutes he was back with the prints. For once his eyes were glowing with enthusiasm.

"Excellent work, my friend!" he cried. "You got complete telescopic views of inside and outside the will-machine. Not a detail is missing."

He held up the pin-sharp prints for the others to see. They were as accurate as a blueprint.

"Then we're ready now to build machines?" Alvia enquired excitedly.

"Definitely we are," Milrax confirmed. "But to make them with the apparatus we have here, good though it is, would be a tedious, wearying job. It would be more to the point if we made moulds for the necessary parts, which is simple, and then ran molten metal into the moulds. In other words, mass-production methods."

"But even with the moulds made we would want a furnace," Jerry pointed out.

"We have one, Earthman—the best ever. My own planet. On the extreme sunward side, as you are aware, metals run like milk. Only one metal does not—diatrx, from which crucibles are fashioned. So, we will fashion diatrx moulds; then on my own planet I will flow the metals into the moulds—and at the same time plant my own jewel."

"But how the devil do you propose to stand the conditions on the sunward side of your world?" Jerry demanded. "Or do you intend to do it from the ship? Be pretty difficult that way."

"I am a Mercutian," Milrax answered simply. "Though we keep mainly to the Twilight Belt for our personal comfort we can, under stress, stand either the full sunward or nightward side of our planet. On this occasion I shall do so, having only a pair of diatrx boots for my feet and diatrx gloves with which to handle the moulds. You will see."

With that he turned to the preparation of the moulds, and whilst he was about it the robot apparatus took the ship onwards to Mercury, wobbling round the sun.

Most of the time Milrax worked with objects like electrodes, fashioning moulds from densely hard metal, following exactly the designs of the machine lying photographed before him. It said much for his careful timing that he had every mould finished by the time Mercury was a whirling globe near a colossal sun.

He took over the controls and began to bring the ship down on the sunward side, settling finally on a rocky ledge. Without a word he donned his gloves and boots, picked up the moulds, then stepped through the air-locks.

Watching through purple goggles, the others followed his movements as he toiled like a solitary speck in the unimaginable torrid glare of the yellow dust. Heat, searing and blinding, poured down on the ship, making the party feel sick. It reflected back from the mountains and poured up from the plain in dizzying waves.

An hour passed; then two hours. The moulds in that sea of shifting metals looked like hieroglyphics. The Mercutian worked steadily in the blaze, enduring conditions which, to an Earthman or Martian, could only have been paralleled by standing in the fiercest furnace.

Then at last Milrax seemed to have finished. He began hauling the first mould back to the ship, bobsleigh fashion, and deposited it in the safety-trap of the ship's belly. After another half-hour he had done the same with all the moulds, and then he came back into the control room and went over to the thermostatic regulators which controlled the safety trap's temperature.

He turned. "In an hour," he said, "those metal pieces will be cooled and ready. Our work here, except for the jewel, is finished."

With that, as though he had done nothing unusual, he sent the ship upwards again, circled over the Twilight Belt, and then headed northwards to the giant plateau on the Belt where there reposed a gigantic extinct volcanic crater. He spent quite a time studying the crater before he spoke.

"The principal underground city of my race is immediately under this crater," he explained. "If I drop my gem into it it will never be found, yet it will be close enough to my people to influence their minds when the time comes."

He took over the controls again, then in a straight run across the crater he pulled the switch which released a floor trap. The gem dropped, hurtling down dead into the centre of the dark circle below.

The Mercutian part of the scheme was complete.

CHAPTER SEVEN

After a while Jerry said : "That leaves Venus. Once get that planet dealt with and we shouldn't be far from achieving our final victory."

"True enough," Milrax agreed. "I have planned that whilst our Venusian friend here is attending to his own planet, we will get the will-power machines made. They only require assembly. So, what plans have you?"

The Venusian himself asked a question. "I take it that before we launch our own will-power efforts on our respective worlds we shall take all possible steps to prevent the Jovians from doing anything?"

"Of course. My idea is to go to Jupiter and rain every known type of destruction down upon them in an endeavour to smash their major plants and means of defence until our own people attack them. Unfortunately," Milrax added, "that will have to be guesswork because we don't know the exact situation of their plants."

"That," the Venusian responded, "is my point. My planet was the last to be conquered. The plant housing

the will-power machine is not entirely complete in the matter of defence. Jovians are still present, as well as Venusians. Some of their space-machines are at the plant, and in them are maps—valuable maps—showing every vital area of Jove. They are for the purpose of getting the necessary positioning for the will-machine."

"So!" The Mercutian's eyes gleamed. "Get those maps, my friend, and we will have every Jovian key-point at our mercy! We can blast them out of existence!"

The Venusian braced himself. "I'll get them—and the sooner the better. I also know of an excellent spot where I can place my gem."

The Mercutian glanced at the chronometer.

"Make your plans. We shall be near enough to Venus for a coffin-ship to take off in about six hours. In the meantime we have machines to assemble . . ."

The assembly of the four will-projectors was half completed when the Venusian gave up his share in the work; and taking his jewel and the usual farewell of his comrades, he clambered out to his own coffin-ship on the bigger vessel's summit.

Inside five minutes he was speeding down to the woolly cover forever swathing his home planet. Knowing it intimately he hardly needed instruments to guide him. Quickly he dived into the welcome cover of the clouds, dodging below them at intervals to get his bearings. Rapidly he shot over mud-flats, rioting vegetation in the Hotlands, steamy blue oceans, and so at length to the cleared, firmer regions where his own enslaved people were.

The chief Venusian city, queer in design, began to loom into view, and to the north of it in isolation the immense structure in which was housed the will-power machinery.

Intently he studied the ground, then he gave a low sigh of relief. Those two Jovian space-ships belonging

to the Jovian engineers were still there, unattended, their safety never for a moment considered to be in doubt with all Venusians under will-control.

The Venusian smiled, patted his insulating helmet, and then drove back into the clouds. He climbed high enough to find out the position of the sun and decided that two more hours would bring night. That was what he needed. And in the meantime . . .

He dived down again, sped citywards, still playing tag with the clouds as he came over the enslaved metropolis. Unseen, he searched carefully for the point he sought—and at last found it. A tall statue was in the city square, wrought in copper-bronze, a statue to a former liberator of his people. It stood with arm out-thrust, a gleaming ruby in the model ray-gun held aloft. The Venusian grinned. This being, in the flesh, had once brought freedom: maybe his image could do it again . . . Back into the clouds went the Venusian.

The moment night dropped with its startling abruptness he came to the ground directly by the statue, unseen in the total moonless darkness. Unheard, he climbed up the statue, took away the ruby, and fixed his own gem in its place. Then he went back to his ship, sped silently through the night, and alighted again not five hundred feet from the two Jovian space-ships outside the power plant.

Inside the power plant he saw both Jovian engineers and slave Venusians at work. The Jovians, being ammonia-breathers, were wearing respirators. The Venusian nodded to himself, went over to the space-ships, and climbed through the air-locks.

The maps he had once seen were still there on the charting benches. It was only the work of a moment to appropriate them, then he hurried back to his own vessel and drove out at top speed into the void. Probably, when the Jovians found out their loss they would radio their home planet immediately. So the only thing

to do was to strike as quickly as possible — without mercy.

To this the Mercutian and the others agreed when they heard the details of the Venusian's success. The Mercutian was particularly satisfied as he studied the charts. Designed for engineers, they gave every strategic point on Jove, both for space pilotage, and so that they could know the position from which will-power vibrations emanated on Jupiter.

For a long time the Mercutian brooded over them in silence, then he clenched his fist.

"Perfect!" he declared. "And the will-power machines are also finished. We did that whilst you were away. We have now only to get the moxobend ores from Io with which to feed them."

Quickly he turned to the switchboard, drove the vessel rapidly away from Venus and set the course for Io. Curious, the Venusian looked at the four completed machines, projectors, fully equipped with their lenses. He nodded in silent admiration.

"Our last moves are in sight," the Mercutian said finally, looking up from the charts. "We are well equipped with explosives, incinerators, and other death-dealing weapons. A single raid in this machine, giving these key-points everything we've got, will both take the Jovians by surprise and incapacitate them against our own forthcoming onslaught. See these points here . . ."

And one by one he indicated the nerve-centres of attack, outlining in detail what he proposed to do. From then on it was purely a matter of containing patience whilst the ship sped with ceaseless velocity through the void.

At last Io loomed out of the distance and manoeuvring began to avoid any possibility of being sighted from nearby Jove, hanging over them in all his enormity. As before, they dodged in and out of the planet's shadow,

coming up finally from the dark side and landing outside the entrance to their cave. It was no more than the work of an hour to transfer sufficient moxobend ingots from the pirated freighter to the space-ship.

Altogether, they loaded up their entire storeroom with the yellow blocks; then out in space once more the Mercutian tested the machines each in turn. To try the effect of his thoughts was impossible since none of his race was present—but the instruments showed clearly that his reasoning had been absolutely correct. The machines worked.

"We're ready," he breathed exultantly. "Now we'll settle with Jupiter — and this may be dangerous. To your action stations and all of you follow out orders implicitly."

When they had all dispersed about the control room he headed the ship towards the monstrous planet hanging before them, its vast bulk girt about by scudding clouds. Not that this hiding of the landscape mattered: the charts had told everything that it was necessary to know. Most of Jupiter's key-points were concentrated on the Red Spot, anyway, the only solid place in an otherwise plasmic world.

Immediately he came below the clouds Milrax beheld the replica of the maps spread below in the gloomy twilight of the giant world. An absolute network, naked and asking for trouble—if trouble could be dealt before the Jovian observers guessed what was coming.

"Right!" Milrax cried suddenly. "Everything you've got!"

Immediately things happened. The Venusian kicked the switch at his feet which started the endless belt carry atomic bombs. They slid down into the discharge chamber, fell from their catches, then dropped . . . one—two—three . . . an endless stream of them.

Grim-faced, the attackers watched what happened.

They saw no ordinary explosions. The atomic force lifted entire squares and buildings bodily out of the ground, hammered relentlessly through defensive screens, tore vast gaps in protective domes. All over the buried city explosions began to flash with savage violence as bomb after bomb crashed down.

Simultaneously, Jerry and Alvia released the incinerator guns to which they had been directed, driving pencils of searing fire at the buildings the bombs had missed. Metal started to melt; roofs sloughed inwards in cataracts of molten steel, carrying with them radio beacons, roof-tops, and space machines and aircraft parks . . .

Jovians began to appear in the streets amidst the greenish, misty vapour which was their atmosphere. The squat, ugly, devilish Jovians. The Mercutian kicked his own machine switch and sent down a rain of small metal eggs. When they burst in the streets they exuded yellow vapour, catching the Jovians in a swirling tide. Weighted by the vast gravity and heavy atmosphere the stuff formed a ground carpet in which Jovians tottered and died.

Systematically, inexorably, the onslaught was maintained, every space-ship centre being attacked, ships blown to atoms, vital connecting points belching clean out of the ground . . .

Then Jerry caught sight of a fleet of Jovian space-fighters leaping up to attack. Instantly he signalled to the Venusian who was waiting beside the twin guns.

He nodded, gazing into the sights—then he pressed the buttons, an unholy grin on his flabby face. Twin beams of blue-white fire zipped across space, slashing the two leading machines right out of the clouds, crippling another one, and sending a fourth spinning down to destruction.

"We've done enough," the Mercutian said finally. "If we stay any longer we'll be risking too much."

He jammed over the switches and pressed all the

party in the control room flat with the speed of the leap he took to high cloud protection. The Venusian took one more aim and saw two more pursuers mushroom; then the clouds hid them, and at the rate the Mercurian ship was moving it was highly improbable the infra-red screens of the pursuers would be able to sight them.

In any case, Milrax was not taking the chance. He hurtled the vessel outwards, faster and faster, upwards into the void, increasing speed as much as he could once the dragging power of Jove's enormous bulk began to weaken . . .

Gradually the distance between them and Jove widened. There was no sign of pursuit, nor was there likely to be, for fighters were purely for local defence and not made to stand up to the rigors of a long space journey.

Gradually the five relaxed and looked at one another in satisfaction.

"I fancy the Jovians will be incapacitated for quite a while," Milrax commented. "That gives us time to act. The moment we reach the inner circle of planets we part—each to his own world, each with his own will-machine. You, Earthman—and you, Earthwoman—will be put on Earth, since your ship was left behind. In each case the will-power order you must issue must be—'Overthrow the Jovians'!"

"In the case of your world, Earthlings, whatever ships have been built for the supposed exodus from cosmic danger must be used for attack. To Earth, indeed, will belong the honour of destroying Jovian villainy at its source. To we others, the destruction of villainy at home. When it is done we will meet again here, in this asteroid belt. Is that understood?"

The others nodded, and shook hands on it.

* * *

About seventy hours later, Jerry, Alvia by his side, was back on Earth, not far from the centre of the city,

both of them well concealed from searching eyes. Discovery was unlikely since it was a dark, cloudy night. The will-power machine was set up, trained on the far distant but visible radio beacon: then Jerry began to concentrate steadily whilst the girl kept on the alert for possible strangers upsetting the proceedings.

How well he had succeeded Jerry knew after some three hours had passed. A fleet of fifty space machines, armed to the limit and obviously new, streaked out into the void. Far away towards the city smoke and flame began to spread itself in the darkness, a sure sign that the Earthlings had at last turned to strike back at their tyrannical taskmasters. Possibly, by now, they had also destroyed the whole array of Jovian power plants.

Taking advantage of the upheaval, Jerry and the girl headed for the city, and, from a high rise of ground, spent some time watching events. They told their own story.

The pedestrian levels were jammed with struggling figures as normal Earth beings and synthetic ones battled with each other in the final show-down. Flame flickered in the great canyons between the buildings; explosion after explosion set the ground trembling. There was the flash of heavy guns and the small flickering pin-points of light as flame pistols came into action. Amidst it all was the rumble of vehicles on the move and the inarticulate shouting of hundreds of angry voices echoing in the flaming darkness.

"Not much doubt that this is the finish, Alvia," Jerry murmured. "Our own people will blast the Jovians here right out of existence. Best thing we can do is try and find a space machine somewhere and get clear of the mess until things are quieter. Come on."

He took the girl's arm, and by a circuitous route, to avoid the main area of the fighting, they made their way to the air-and-space port. As they had expected, the people were so busy dealing with each other they had

left the port unguarded. To find an empty space machine was simple enough and before very long Jerry had it out in the void. Looking back into the depths where the struggle was still in progress, he gave a grin.

"I think Earth will be okay now, Alvia," he commented. "Jovian domination here is finished. And the pounding Jupiter will get from that fleet of fifty machines will about finish things off properly."

"What do we do?" Alvia asked. "Go and watch what happens?"

Jerry considered for a moment or two and then shook his head.

"No, that wouldn't be such a good idea. Might be tempting providence too far. We've escaped by the skin of our teeth up to now, so we'd better play safe. Best thing is to head about as far as the asteroids, from which vantage point we can tell by radio exactly what's happening."

He turned to the controls and from then on sped the machine quickly back through the wastes of space to the asteroid region, after which it became simply a matter of waiting around and listening to the space radio.

From each plane came the reassuring news of the overthrowing of enslavement, of a mystic resurgence of normal will-power, of unknown orders and advice coming from nowhere, which had utterly swamped the grinding, inexorable orders of the Jovians . . .

From Jove itself, however, there was no information, so Jerry and Alvia could only conjecture how the final battle there was working out. In actual fact it was a struggle to the death, insofar that in the brief interval the Jovians had had the chance to prepare their battered defences and, knowing that a new attack would be launched, they were ready for it when it came. The fifty Earth machines, their commanders knowing only the command to "Destroy the Jovians"

found themselves facing a terrific barrier of destructive energies. The whole area above the hastily patched up underground city was impregnable. And to make the defence doubly secure every available Jovian fighting space machine was in action.

In clouds they descended from the upper heights, their destructive beams and disintegrative radiations flinging hell at the Earth fleet. In the first five minutes of the struggle ten Earth space-ships were destroyed, transformed into mushrooms of dripping metal.

So the Earth commanders let fly with everything they had got. A deluge of atomic and H-bombs, together with others of even more terrific violence, rained down on the screens of energy far below. The targets were pin-pointed by instruments only, the green fog of the clouds being used for cover from the swirling fighters.

Nothing happened! No matter how powerful the bombs they were incapable of penetrating the elemental forces which the Jovians were using . . . So two of the commanders risked diving below cloud cover to use their disintegrator beams. They got in several savage thrusts which pierced the energy-screen in places before hurtling fighters blasted the two daring Earth machines out of existence.

The commanders in the remaining vessels were well aware of what had happened: the X-ray screens had shown them everything. Commander Linward in particular, actually in control of the entire fleet, was particularly grim.

"That was a damned fool chance to take," he commented, to his first mate, as they both stood in the control room watching the screens. "Those men could have pin-pointed the energy barrier with their X-ray pick-ups. Instead they chose to show themselves . . . and paid for it."

"Do you think we ought to withdraw, sir?" the first mate asked. "These Jovian devils are thicker than flies

and there are not many more than forty of our machines left."

Linward was silent, his gaze on the dense green vapours. At the moment the vessel's armoury was silent—as it was on the other vessels in the fleet, not very far away and likewise hidden by the ammoniated fog.

"If we retreat now, we've lost," Linward said at length, clenching his fist. "It will give the Jovians time to get themselves straightened out and no matter how many machines we bring against them they'll be able to flatten us. We know that each planet has been freed of their domination—by some force not yet explained—but that domination will return if we don't strike at the heart —now!"

"But with that defence, sir, it's impossible!"

"Is it? Those two machines which used disintegrator beams went through it in places as though it were tissue paper. It can evidently withstand explosive, but not absolute disintegration. That is our only answer."

"And be picked off like clay pigeons as we break cloud cover?" the first mate asked.

Linward was silent for a moment, making up his mind over something. Finally he turned to the radio equipment and snapped it on. He spoke deliberately.

"We face an issue, boys," he said, in his most informal manner. "If we run for it, the Jovians will have us right back where we started and we'll never break free again. If we sacrifice ourselves we can perhaps smash them forever. We shall not live to enjoy the fruits — but the rest of the men and women on four planets will. The issue, simply, is this: We must switch on every available disintegrator at full strength and then set the fuses on our delayed-action atomic and H-bombs. We dive . . . Seventy-five per cent. of us should blast a way through the screen. Down we'll go until we hit the city. The bombs, timed exactly, will

explode at that moment and lift such hell on Jove as has never been seen before. And we shall die," the commander finished quietly.

He was silent for a moment or two, giving the men in the various machines time to think over his words. Then he continued :

"It is quite obvious that somewhere a certain number of people have risked death hundreds of times to bring freedom to the four planets—and not in vain either, for they have broken the hypnosis of the Jovians. Those unknowns are probably relying on us to finish the job since we were given orders, hypnotically, to destroy the Jovians. That hypnotic power has ceased now, but in essence, the order remains the same. I have said what we must do, but since such a mission involves certain death, I am not making it an order. I am calling for volunteers. Two machines will stand by to take on those who do not, for various reasons other than personal, wish to commit suicide . . . I am carrying through the plan. Those of you who do not intend to join in this plunge will inform your commanders and I shall expect your reports within ten minutes."

With that, Linward switched off and stood in silence, looking out of the port. At last he turned, no smile on his craggy face. He was living his last hours, and knew it.

"I'm with you, sir," the first mate said. "Suits me. Nobody to bother about. They all died under this stinking Jovian domination. I'm willing to die too, to destroy it."

"I'm hoping plenty of them will see it that way," Linward answered.

When the ten minutes were up he got his answer, and it made him smile briefly with admiration. Not a single man wished to back out. All of them, it seemed, had seen their families and loved ones torn from them—and in many cases, had seen them killed, and they too were

willing to sacrifice life itself in an effort to obliterate the Jovian menace from the face of the universe. The only stipulation was that it must not be half-hearted. All—or nothing.

"It shall be all, I promise you," Linward answered. "Set your bomb fuses for twelve minutes hence. Upon my signal start driving downwards with all disintegrators in action. We will converge straight on the energy screen covering the city."

He switched off and turned quickly to his own men and gave them their orders. With calm efficiency and speed the heavy bomb load in the holds was dealt with, each terrific explosive having its time-fuse set in action. Then the men moved to the disintegrators and switched them on.

Linward looked at his watch, waited a second or two, then pressed the button which gave the radio signal to the remainder of the fleet. He nodded at the same time to the first mate and the control switch moved under his grip.

The vessel began moving. The rest of the men were silent, but they looked at each other as, each at his different post, the machine gathered speed in what must be the last journey it would ever make.

Faster . . . and still faster. Linward stood at the outlook port, his powerful hands resting on the ledge. Then he looked up sharply as the vessel plunged out of cloud cover. To either side, strung out in a nearly straight line, were the rest of the machines, all of them heading down towards the one central point where the underground city lay.

Immediately the watchful Jovian fighters dived to the attack. Their beams jabbed viciously; their atomic cannons fired without ceasing. Here and there an Earth vessel reeled and exploded, but the rest went on—faster and faster on a suicide dive. Too late, the Jovians far below in the underground city realised what

was intended. They flung up everything they had got in the way of beams and destructive devices—but the fleet came on relentlessly.

The energy screen began to buckle under the strain of unremitting disintegrative power. Vapours swirled. The fleet literally fell out of the murky Jovian sky with the fighters in pursuit . . . The screen was pierced! Rocking and swaying the survivors of the fleet crashed downwards, beyond all control now, clean into the heart of the hastily repaired city of the Jovians.

Then, indeed, hell itself broke loose. Every bomb, timed to the split second, exploded almost immediately after the fleet had crashed into the midst of twisted girders and riven machines. The very heart of Jove seemed to be blown out of existence. The rocks heaved. The city itself smashed and flattened before the unthinkable blast. There was not a Jovian who could withstand the inconceivable violence of the explosion. All over the giant planet the plasmic surface rippled and flowed for a moment or two and then settled back. But in settling back the molten wilderness flowed inwards, over the Red Spot, deluging it, blotting it out forever under a sea of fluid metal.

The great Red Spot had gone, and with it the greatest menace the Solar System had ever been called upon to face . . .

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To Jerry and Alvia, waiting in the region of the asteroids, there became visible after many hours the coffin-ship of the Martian; then a little later the Venusian's vessel appeared — and last of all came the bigger machine of Mercury. The three machines moved inwards, the smaller congregated about the larger, until finally all the inmates were gathered once more in the familiar control room of the Mercutian vessel.

Milrax looked about him expectantly, his queer eyes gleaming.

"Success," announced the Venusian and Martian together.

"Earth people have revolted," Jerry added.

"And my world, too, is free," Milrax said. "Our instruments have shown violent disturbances from Jupiter. What they signify, I do not know, but it is certainly a fact that our telescopes cannot find any traces of the great Red Spot. It would seem that the destruction of the Jovians has been absolute."

"A lot of brave men have made it so, I fancy," Jerry said quietly. "Fifty space machines attacked Jove: none of them have come back."

There was silence; then the Mercurian said: "It will not be long before we each return to our respective worlds to explain—and to rule, if need be."

"I don't think there's any doubt about that," Jerry answered. "I intend to return to the position I formerly occupied—that of ruler of my planet—but I do not wish to include the other worlds under my rulership. I think peace amongst us can only come on the 'good neighbour' policy, as we called it back in my time. Each of you to rule your own particular world. That method is safest."

"And we will form a new Union of Four," the Mercurian decided. "The same Union, but different in that it is designed for peace and prosperity, not for destruction and domination of others."

Jerry held out his hand and found it clasped by three others. Just for a moment he thought of the time from which he had come, of two friends who had helped him and . . . With a shrug he turned and looked at Alvia. She was smiling at him. He reached out and put an arm about her slim waist.

"It takes two to rule a planet like Earth," he said. "We need to understand the masculine and feminine sides to get the balance true."

"We will," Alvia assured him, and the men of the other worlds looked on in puzzled interest as Jerry kissed the girl gently. To them, the customs of Earthlings were strange indeed.

THE END

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